Acts
Mission to Ephesus

Study 19 | Acts 19:1-41

INTRODUCTION

The city of Ephesus was the principle city, the capital of Asia Minor, the area that Paul was originally forbidden by the Spirit to enter (16:6). Though Ephesus was commercial center as well, it was pre-eminently a center of pagan religions and occult practices. The Imperial cult flourished there, with three temples dedicated to the practice. But the pride of the city was the Temple of Artemis (Diana) whose building was four times the size of the Parthenon and called one of the seven wonders of the world. The temple was such an attraction that it drew huge numbers of people from all over the world. As a result, the temple became an enormous economic boon to the city, generating a great deal of income from visitors, and serving as a banking institution in its own right. Because of the prominence of those two cults, a tremendous variety of occult groups and practices flourished in Ephesus.

1. **vv.1-7. Recall what we know about Apollos (18:24-28). How does that account for the "problem" of these men? Do you think these men were Christians? Look at Paul's questions and try to discern what elements were missing and what elements must be present before a person can truly said to be a Christian?**

The problem. Apollos, who had ministered in Ephesus, originally preached Jesus, but only *"knew only the baptism of John"* (v.25). In other words, John the Baptist's disciples, who believed Jesus was the Messiah, had also spread the word about the Christ. But, of course, the disciples of John had not been instructed thoroughly in the Scriptures by the risen Christ as had the apostles, including Paul. Thus Luke said that Apollos in some ways *"taught about Jesus accurately"* (v.25), but needed more *"adequate"* knowledge and instruction in the *"way of God"* (v.26). From our vantage point, it isn't possible to be sure what these rudimentary Jesus followers knew and did not. But this partial or faulty knowledge is the reason for the inadequate experience of the twelve men here, who only knew John's baptism and who had not received the Holy Spirit (19:2-3).

There have been some who have insisted that these twelve men were real Christians (i.e. born again) but they had not received the Holy Spirit's power with the accompanying sign of speaking in tongues. Many Pentecostal churches have pointed to this as a norm for Christians, who first are born again and later receive the Holy Spirit. But that is a very dubious reading of the passage. These men evidently called themselves *"disciples"* (v.1) of Christ, but most commentators, including many charismatic ones such as Michael Green, acknowledge that these are clearly not Christians. How do we know that?

Are they Christians? First, Paul asks if they have evidence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They respond that they didn't even know there was a Holy Spirit. (v.2) That shows that these men did not hear the gospel from anyone who went out from Christ's church — no one would preach the gospel without talking about the spiritual new birth at least. This ignorance of the Holy Spirit — both intellectual and personal — is not characteristic of a born again person who needs spiritual power. These men were devoid of the Holy Spirit at all. Second, we notice that, when they said that they did not receive the Holy Spirit, Luke says, *"so Paul asked, 'then what baptism…'"* (v.3). This shows that the fact that they did not receive the Holy Spirit was abnormal. Paul says, "if this is the case, how did you receive Christ at the beginning?" He does not proceed and say, "oh, well, then you need to have me lay hands on you so you can receive power." Rather, their lack of spiritual experience makes him re-examine their foundations. Clearly, this is not a "norm" for anyone.

What are the elements? Paul asks, *"what baptism did you receive"?* (v.3), and discover that it was *"John's".* Paul responds that John's baptism was, in essense, only "half a gospel" — the "bad news" of repentance. *"John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, [but] he told the people to believe in the one coming… in Jesus."* (v.4). In other words, he is saying — "you repented, but you did not yet believe. John told you that you did need to eventually believe, and now I will tell you about the one in whom you must now trust". In a sense, Paul is using the term "baptism" to mean "message". John's message was not the full gospel. He showed people that they could not save themselves by their good works, that they had to repent. That *is* the first half of the gospel, a true and right step away from moralism and human religion. He also indicated that there was a second half to the gospel — belief in the *one coming after him.* Now Paul explains the way of Christ to them. We don't know what they didn't understand — it could have been that they did not understand the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection on our behalf. But when after *"hearing this"* they were baptized *into the name of Jesus* (v.5). That phrase "into the name" means that they came to know who Jesus was. This time, God showed everyone that they had been born again with a visible manifestation of power with speaking in tongues. We have seen that at other important times (but not always) God sends these little imitations of the day of Pentacost (Acts 8, 10, and here) as a way to show his approval and presence.

The elements are these then: a) there must be repentance, b) there must be faith in Jesus, c) there must be the new spiritual birth and presence of the Holy Spirit. That is what makes a Christian a Christian.

2. vv.8-22. What was Paul's main method in his mission in Ephesus, and how does it compareand contrast with those in Corinth and Athens? Make a list of all the methods of evangelism you've seen Paul use.

First, we can see the similarities:

a) He began again with the synagogue, where he always can get two things done: (1) discharge his passionate obligation to win his own people to Christ (cf. Rom.10:1), and (2) to win the strategic people, the "God-fearers" who are the natural bridges to the broader pagan society. This he did both in Athens and in Corinth.

b) After winning some *"disciples"* there (v.9b) he took them into a new venue to reach the Gentile public, by going into the *"lecture hall of Tyrannus"* (v.9). This he did also in Athens (by going into the public marketplace) and in Corinth (by going into the home of Titius Justus).

c) Finally, his teaching resulted in an uproar, the riot of vv.23ff. In Athens, the uproar was very mild, it took the form of mockery and intellectual scorn by the Aereopagus. In Corinth, it was more serious, with the Jewish leaders making a lawsuit against Paul to stop his ministry. Here we have a riot by a pagan mob. But in every case, there was some sort of strong public resistance to the work of the gospel that Paul had to respond to.

Second, we see the dissimilarities:

The lecture hall ministry a first for Paul, though it was something like the marketplace ministry in Athens. This was a public meeting place, a school. Unlike the home meetings in Corinth, this was a more academic setting. It is important to see that this was not preaching, but rather he *"had discussions daily"*. The NIV translation is seeking to get across the Greek word *dialegomenos* — to dialogue. This is very daring, because it allows the non-believing listener to partially set the agenda, to raise questions and respond. It is not like either a sermon or a "gospel presentation", it allows give an take. It is also not like "friendship evangelism" since it was done with all comers. It is also not like the informal dialogues on the street, since the listeners can return week after week. It is mostly like a class.

So this "dialogue" evangelism in a public place with all comers is different than

a) The "preaching evangelism" in the synagogue. This was with Biblically literate people and consisted of long Biblical sermons.

b) The "contact" evangelism in the marketplace. This was essentially street evangelism with strangers, and probably onsisted of short presentations of the gospel followed by give and take dialogue.

c) The "friendship" evangelism in homes. This was with friends and relatives and consisted of informal conversation.

d) The "apologetic" evangelism in the Areopagus. This was with cultural elites, and consisted of a well-reasoned "apologetic" or defense of the gospel, using authorities and sources that are well-respected.

3. Take some time to reflect on how Paul's mission methods (especially in Acts 17-19) instruct the modern church? What does he do that we neglect or omit?

a) First, he is more flexible than most ministries or churches. He has a very broad array of different approaches, and he tried them all. Generally, churches and minstries settle on one approach. Now that is good, in that most of us are not as multi-gifted as Paul, and we cannot do them all. We should concentrate on what we can do with our skill-set. But on the other hand, most ministries and churches tend to see their method as the only one, the best one. We are so uncreative that we look at the city through unconscious "screens" and mental filters, so we see only the opportunities for our pet methods, or we see only the people who can be reached with our methods. We need to be far more creative and multi-dimensional. In our city, we should find people who can do them all

b) Second, he spent far more time sharing his faith in secular spaces than "sacred" ones. Though he went to synagogues, he spent far more time in private homes, market places, and public buildings. If we are to follow Paul, we will not do most of our ministry "at church" but out in the workplace, the marketplce, the home, lecture halls, clubs, and so on. We see him finding opportunities to speak, dialogue, and make presentations of the gospel in every setting possible.

c) Third, his presentations were very well reasoned, intelligent. He was completely unafraid of questions and debate and intellectual engagement. The two Greek verbs continually used in both chapter 18 and 19 are *dialegomai* ("to reason" or "to argue") and *peitho* ("to persuade"). As we have seen throughout the book of Acts, the gospel is not simply proclaimed, but reasons for belief — both personal and intellectual — are always given as well.

> "Because [Paul] believed the gospel to be true, he was not afraid to engage the minds of his hearers. He did not simply proclaim his message in a 'take it or leave it' fashion; instead he marshalled arguments to support and demonstrate his case… What he renounced in Corinth (See 1 Cor 1 and 2) was the wisdom [the premises of the world], not the wisdom of God, and the rhetoric of the Greeks, not the use of arguments… We must never set… trust in the Holy Spirit over against… arguments… as alternatives. No, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, and he brings people to faith in Jesus not in spite of the evidence, but because of the evidence, when he opens their minds to attend to it."
>
> – Stott, p.312-313

d) Fourth, we see Paul identifying with the people of the city and got to understand their life and ways. He spent a year and a half at Corinth (18:11 - but v.18 indicates he spent time after that — perhaps two years all told.) Then he went to Ephesus where he stayed three months at his synagogue preaching-evangelism and then two years at his lecture hall dialogue-evangelism. (19:8,10). We know from 20:34 that Paul continued his tent-making in Ephesus. In other words, he really became part of those communities, living and working among the people and getting to know them from the "inside", not just as a traveling speaker who was only, essentially, a tourist.

To learn from Paul's "tentmaking" we need to extend the application and talk about the importance of community involvement. At one point in the Corinthian ministry, Paul did "full time evangelism", but both at Corinth and Ephesus he participated in the economic and social life of the city as a co-citizen. It is important that some Christians become very involved in the social and economic life of the city, doing significant labor for safe neighborhoods, economic development, etc. Christians need to be fully engaged in the civic life of the city.

e) Fifth, we see Paul made himself accessible to the unbelievers. He allowed people to come back at him, to get to know him. Paul essentially allowed the non-believing listener to be co-partners in setting the agenda for each presentation of the gospel. There is an ancient textual footnote to 19:9 that tells us Paul lectured from 11:00 am to 4:00 pm everyday. (F. F. Bruce proposes that classes probably took place in the hall during the morning, at the same time Paul did his tent-making. Then he went to the lecture hall and dialogued all afternoon — 5 hours a day! See Bruce, pp.388-389). By putting himself in a public place, day after day, he showed himself ready to answer any questions. He was not defensive or "pontifical", but accessible and engaging.

> "When we contrast much contemporary evangelism with Paul's, its shallowness is immediately shown up. Our evangelism tends to be too ecclesiastical (inviting people to church) whereas Paul also took the gospel out into the secular world; too emotional (appeals for decision without an adequate basis of understanding), whereas Paul taught, reasoned and tried to persuade; and too superficial (making brief encounters and expecting quick results), whereas Paul stayed in Corinth and Ephesus for five years, faithfully sowing gospel seed and in due time reaping a harvest."
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> – Stott, p.314

Follow-up question: Make a list of way that our church or ministry could do all of the five methods that we have seen Paul use.

a) Preaching "synagogue" evangelism.

Sunday preacher preaches to both Christians and non-routinely.
Christians bring a friends to church.
Response classes for seekers at church.

b) Contact "market square" evangelism.

"Booths" and evangelism at public events: parades, fairs, expos.
Street/ park evangelism: outdoor concert and speaker and follow-up.
Tracts and literature handouts.

c) Friendship "household" evangelism.

Home small group fellowship meetings with non-believers present
Home discussion group series targeted just for non-believers
Home Outreach event (BPO HOB's; many variations possible on an evangelistic dessert or reception for friends)
Personal friendship evangelism with relatives, associates, over coffee or meal

d) Dialogue "lecture hall" evangelism.

Evangelistic lecture, dialogue at colleges and grad schools or artistic/cultural institutions (Christian perspective on subject of broad interest)
Evangelistic breakfasts, luncheons in business centers, clubs (Talk and dialogue on subject of broad interest to business men and women)
"Open Forum": artistic presentation and evangelistic talk and dialogue in some public concert space or theater

e) Apologetic "Mars Hill" evangelism.

Regular column in major newspaper or respected periodical
TV/radio venues that reach non-Christians (not media aimed at Christians)
Addressing major associations of academics or media elite or other opinion-makers
Books aimed at unbelievers that command broad respect (e.g."Mere Christianity") or respect from specific "elite" audiences (e.g. philosophical works)
Major movie that establishes some parts of Christian truth/message

4. vv.11-20. What can we learn: a) about the place of miracles in ministry from vv.11-12, b) about the power of Jesus' name from vv.13-16, c) about the marks of real conversion from vv.17-20?

a) We should see a balance here in Luke's description of miracles. First, Luke calls them *"extraordinary"* (v.11). That is not just a gushing remark, as to say "wonderful, tremendous". The Greek word *tychousas* literally means "singular" or "unusual". That means that these were very unusual signs, sent by God to support the Ephesian ministry. There is no indication that they happened

everywhere, nor is there indication that Paul and his team expected them to. We are not to assume miracles as typical and normal in ministry. Even the great St.Paul did not consider them normative in his ministry, and he was an apostle-- how should we then do so? But second, on the other hand, this account should make us wary of being skeptical and cynical about the power of God to heal. We should pray for God's power to heal people (as we are told in James 5:16).

b) We should see her that Jesus' name is not magic. The story is actually very humorous. Seven Jewish exorcists had heard about the "power of Jesus name", and decided to "try it out". They clearly don't understand the gospel for themselves. They say, "I command you in the name of Jesus, who Paul preaches" (v.13) because they themselves do not preach or present Jesus. The demon says, in effect: "I know Jesus and Paul — but who the heck do you guys think you are?" and jumps them! The point is the there is nothing mechanically or automatically powerful about the sound "Jesus" made when the breath passes through the voicebox in a particular way. The efficacy of Jesus "name" lies only in the understanding of what Jesus came to do — its the gospel of Jesus which is powerful. When we use the gospel of Jesus on our lives, it cleanses and transforms and heals. But therefore Jesus' name has no second-hand power — it only works first hand, when appropriated through personal understanding and commitment.

We may want to look at ourselves here. Don't be too sure that we don't do what the Seven sons of Sceva did. When we invoke his name and ask for his help and power while we are a) not enjoying him, and b) not obeying him–is magic.

c) We learn in vv.17-20 that true conversion leads to a concrete change in lifestyle. These new converts had been involved in occult practices and *"evil deeds"*. They made open and visible changes in their lives. Those who renounced sorcery and burned their magic books did so at great financial loss. (Had they sold their manuscripts to keep their value, the books would have led others to stumble and be entangled.) Sometimes, becoming a Christian will mean walking away from lucrative business practices.

5. vv.23-41. What caused the riot? What lessons can we draw from it? What do you think was Luke's purpose in relating this account of the riot?

As we noted in the introduction, the Diana-cult was probably the most important "industry" to Ephesus' economy. Demetrius, who may have been the head of the silversmith's "guild" or association, was outraged that the growth of Christianity was leading to fewer idols and shrines (made by the silversmiths) being sold. Though Demetrius' concern was purely economic (not ethical or religious), even the ancient pagans did not want to look greedy. So when he begins to stir up opposition to Paul, he does not directly mention any loss of revenue. He appeals to their professional pride (*"our trade will lose its good name"* v.27) and their civic/religious pride (*"the goddess… of Asia… will*

be robbed of her divine majesty" v.27). Frankly, these were "code words" for plain greedy materialism and xenophobic patriotism! Notice how later, there was no willingness to let the Christians defend themselves. When they *"saw he was a Jew"* , their racism asserted itself they simply shouted the Christians down (v.36).

It is unpleasant to contemplate the lessons from this account. Clearly, there will be much opposition to the gospel which is not sincere or reasonable. It is intellectually and spiritually completely closed to the truth, and it is concerned with nothing by a power play. Paul wanted to reason with the people (v.30-31) but he was foolish to want to do it. There are times in which Christians should not make themselves accessible to evil purposes. It is never loving to make it easy for someone to sin against you.

Luke probably wrote this down for the same reason he mentions Gallio's pronouncement in chapter 18. The city clerk, like Gallio demonstrates that Christianity was not illegal, for it posed no threat to the civic order, that opposition to it was purely personal. Surely many opponants of Christianity in Luke's time were trying to stop the gospel in any way possible. One of the ways was to try to get it banned from the public arena by branding it unpatriotic or subversive of the public order. But both in Corinth and Ephesus, public Roman officials rule that this is not the case. Luke is therefore citing legal precedent in order to anticipate possible objections and head them off. Maybe Luke had been a lawyer as well as a doctor!

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

The following is part of a series of sheets to give and discuss with friends who don't believe the Christian faith. This particular set of sheets is the most difficult. With many people, it would be good to skip some or all of them. But they will be absolutely necessary with a number of people, especially those who have thought through their objections to Christianity in a coherent way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**

4. **Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?**

B. HOW TO BELIEVE IN ANYTHING (B-1)

How can we come to know if a religion like Christianity is true? Before we outline an approach (in B-3), we need to deal with two common assertions in B-1 and B-2. These are by far the most difficult sheets of the series.

1. "I don't have to believe in God unless you can prove his existence."

Many people have taken this for granted for years, but there are grounds why this isn't a rational assertion (on its own terms), nor a fair one. First, it is in the end a self-contradictory statement. To say "belief in God is only rational if there is proof" puts a burden on belief in God that you don't put on yourself for many of your most basic beliefs. 1) You cannot prove that you were eating lunch today — because memory is something we must take on faith. 2) You cannot prove that because paper is flammable in the past it will be in the future, because cannot prove the uniformity of nature, but rather must assume it. 3) You cannot prove the existence of other persons, that your senses are showing you the real world "out there". Why not? You can't prove logic without using logic, which is to assume the very thing you are trying to prove. You can't prove that our sense experience is valid without using our sense experience, which is to assume the very thing you are trying to prove. You can't prove that the future will be like the past without saying, "well it always has been so in the past", which is to base your argument on the principle you are trying to prove. So we cannot prove our most basic beliefs about the existence of persons, the uniformity of nature, the reliability of our senses, and yet we consider someone who denies them as irrational!

I know that this kind of thinking makes one's head hurt. But we have to address this very common assertion. The assertion "a belief is only rational if it is proved by logic or scientific investigation" is then irrational on its own terms, since it cannot be verified in the way it makes demands on other assertions. "Proof", then, is not the only way to know things for certain.

Second, the statement is not fair. Belief in God is not like belief in the Yeti, the "abominable snowman". There would be no warrant to believe in such a thing without empirical proof. But two people who disagree about the Yeti can still agree about the rest of the reality, whereas two people who disagree about the reality of God have a different view of everything else. One person believes everything exists only because of God, and the other believes all things are able to exist "on their own". Now since the origin and the limits of the universe are hidden to us, both views of reality are assumptions of faith. So to disbelieve in God is at that moment to believe "I live in a universe in which nature is uniform and in which reason and sense perception work, all without God." How can you prove that? We've seen that you cannot. So the non-believer in God is not in a neutral, uncommitted position. You cannot act as if the Christian's world-view is on trial and yours is not. You cannot demand a proof for the Christian's basic beliefs about the universe that you yourself cannot produce.

(B-2)

2. "But you have demonstrated too much! Since no one can prove anything at all, no one can be sure of anything at all."

We have seen that a person who insists that basic belief in God must be proven gives reason "too much credit", how it cannot prove any foundational beliefs about the nature of the universe. But there is an opposite mistake that can be made — to give reason too little credit. Many people today are going beyond even the "no religion is superior" view of A-2 to a radical skepticism, saying that we cannot know any reality at all. Maybe, these folk say, our faculties don't tell us anything about the world as it is, but only impose a "structure" on reality. So we actually "create our own reality".

But this view is untenable because it is dishonest; it will not use its own critical tools on itself. Radical skeptics cannot disagree with using laws of logic without using laws of logic. They cannot communicate their points without expecting their words to be understood (thus showing their belief in the reliability of sense perception). They insist that our perception of reality is not reliable, but they are assuming then that there is an objective reality that exists or else they could not say we are failing to see it. In short, you cannot contradict the idea of truth without using it.

Where does this leave us? We said that the "basic beliefs" we mentioned in B-2 — memory, sense perception, the uniformity of nature, the reality of the external world, the laws of logic — that could not be proven without using them. But now we also see now that we cannot deny them without using them either. That shows that though we cannot prove them, we also cannot avoid knowing them, no matter how much we protest that we don't believe in them. We just "find ourselves" knowing these things inescapably. If you cannot even doubt something without affirming it, there is no use doubting it.

Where does this leave us? Pascal summarized it perfectly in *Pensee* 406. *"We have an incapacity for proving anything which no amount of dogmatism can overcome. We have an idea of truth which no amount of skepticism can overcome."* On the one hand, we must not make the "over-rational" objection that Christianity has to be proven before it can be believed. On the other hand, we must not make the "under-rational" objection that there is no objective truth, or that we cannot use our reason and senses to sift the evidence for it.

Summary: We really do know many things by evidence and probability, but almost nothing at all by "proof". Now that we have rid ourselves of 1) the demand for absolute proof, yet 2) radical skepticism about reason, and also 3) the mistaken notion that non-belief in God is neutral and objective, we can get to work to outline a way to sift and evaluate the evidence for Christianity.

(B-3)

3. "How can we test different sets of religious beliefs to come to know which ones are true?"

First we must recognize that everyone has a "world-view". This is a master theory of life which is a set of interlocking beliefs based on some ultimate criterion for determining truth and falsity. For example, your ultimate criterion might be logical consistency (rationalism — the mind), or empirical observation (empiricism — the senses), or one's own experience (existentialism — the feelings), or some religious authority (the Bible, Koran), or some other authority (family tradition, ethnic culture) etc. Now we cannot "prove" an ultimate critierion without using it, or without assuming some other one. For example, if an empiricist says, "I will only believe that which is proven scientifically", you could be asked, "but how can you prove that scientific proof is the only valid criterion for truth?" In that case he or she might say, "well, I know it in my heart — I just feel it is right." Now you are talking like an existentialist, and you aren't an empiricist! But the next question will be, "how can you know that your heart and experience is in touch with reality?" And so on.

So are we all stuck within our world-view frameworks? No. Thomas Kuhn, in his landmark book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, demonstrates how we interpret "facts" and "evidence" in terms of our own world view (what he calls a paradigm). But a stream of phenomena may become evident which the paradigm cannot explain. The lack of the paradigm's *explanatory power* leads the holders of the paradigm to question whether it is really in accord with reality. The holders may posit a new paradigm and see if the phenomena can better be explained and made to "fit" coherently in this new framework. If they can, there is a "revolution"! The old world-view or theoretical framework is shaken and falls to the ground and the new one is moved into.

Second, we need to test our world views using "givens" that we cannot avoid knowing. We have seen that all of us, regardless of our "ultimate criterion" cannot doubt without affirming certain "givens" — that there is a material universe, that nature is uniform, that our rational intuition works, and so on. If we agree on that these things are there, we now can ask: "whose world-view can best explain what we see, and whose world-view leads us to expect the opposite of what we see? We look at the premises of each world view and ask: if the premise of this world view leads to conclusions that do not fit with what we see, the "givens", then we need to reject the premises.

Third, no person can examine Christianity without at the very same time testing his or her own world-view. Our approach then will be to show that there is more evidence for Chriistianity than for any alternative world-view (and everyone has one). Though there are difficulties with the Christian faith, the alternatives have far more trouble accounting for and "making sense" of what we know. Our argument will be that Christianity explains and accounts for everything we observe, not just a narrow range of data. As Pascal put it: *"Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or our death, of God, or of ourselves."* *Pensees* 417

(B-4)

4. "But how can I be <u>certain</u> that Christianity is true before I believe in it?"

Actually you can't. But we must not be too dissappointed or even surprised at this. Why? First, because virtually everything else in life works on principles of rational probability, not certainty, and they suffice for us. Second, because God is personal, and persons cannot be known for certain without commitment.

First, consider how reason only takes us to a state of probability, and then we must commit if we are going to reach a state of certainty. The demand for "proof" was a quest for religious certainty apart from making a commitment. But the rest of life does not work that way. If you are going to hire someone to work for you in your office, rational inquiry can only indicate who is probably the right person for the job, but you will have to commit to the candidate (hire him or her) to be certain. Also, consider how evidence is sifted and evaluated in a court of law. The judge tells the jury to convict if the accused is guilty beyond a "reasonable" doubt, not beyond a <u>possible</u> doubt. In other words, it is virtually impossible to demonstrably prove that a person did a crime, but that is not necessary for the law to work.

Second, consider what we said, before, that belief in God is more like belief in other persons and minds than like belief in the Abominable Snowman. Imagine that both Susie and Sally want to marry Michael. Sally is a serial killer in prison, and she insists she will probably do it again; Susie is compassionate, disciplined, smart, and kind. How can Michael be sure which one will be the better wife? All the rational evidence points to Susie, not Sally. But he cannot be certain, he cannot prove that Susie will be a good wife until he marries her. There no certainty with persons before commitment. He also cannot prove that Sally will not change beyond a possible doubt — but he can be confident that she will be a bad wife beyond a reasonable doubt.

Now, in real life, this level of probability suffices us. Suppose Michael would say, "since you can't prove your case, and since it is possible that Sally will be a good wife, then that should be my position." We would retort, "why?" We would all think him irrational. Yet skeptics, in just this way, will often insist that, "since you can't prove your case, and since it is possible to disbelieve in God, then that should be my position."

So the purpose of our process of rational expression is to show that it is very rational to be a Christian, in fact, more rational than to hold to any other set of beliefs. When we have done that we have done our job. We can go no further, because no process of reasoning can rob us of the risk of commitment. If we cannot know any other significant person without it — what makes us think we could know God without it?

Acts
Farewell to Ephesus

Study 20 | Acts 20:1-38

INTRODUCTION

This chapter tells how Paul left Ephesus, where he had lived for approximately three years. Of particular interest in the "farewell to the Ephesian elders" in vv.17-38, because a) it is the only speech or address in Acts which is delivered to a Christian audience, and b) it is the only speech or address to specifically to the original Christian leaders — *elders* or *bishops* (v.17 and 28). This therefore shows us what the "words of encouragement" were that Paul used to strengthen young churches and new leaders.

1. vv.1-16. Where was Paul heading when he set out from Ephesus? Why did he take such a roundabout route? How were these difficulties actually an advantage for Paul and the church? What do you learn from this for yourself (cf.Gen.50:20)?

Where was he heading?

For some three years, Paul made Ephesus the base for his evangelistic and church planting ministry in Asia Minor. But Luke shows us that Paul did not intend to remain there. In 19:21 we are told that Paul planned to return to Jerusalem and, after that, go to Rome. 16:16 also shows us that Jerusalem was his goal, but early chapter 20 shows that his trip thereto was continually interrupted and diverted into detours and delays. Why?

Why did he take such a roundabout route?

a) First, we see that he intended it to be somewhat roundabout, because he wanted to combine a typical visit to the churches of Macedonia and Greece with his trip home. v.2 tells us *"he set out for Macedonia"*, which is of course not the most direct way to Jerusalem! He could have gone right to the coast of Asia Minor and sailed home. But he intended to go over to Greece and sail home from there (v.3 – *he was about to sail for Syria*) so he could visit the churches he had planted. What does this show us? It again shows us that the ministry of *encouragement* is absolutely crucial, especially for newer believers. (Remember the ministry of Barnabus in earlier chapters.) Again, we have the Greek word *paraklesis* ("encouragement") used twice — Paul encourages the Ephesians (v.1) and then goes through all the churches providing *"many words of encouragement"*. So here we learn that encouragement is such an important ministry that we should let ourselves be very inconvenienced in order to provide it. It has a priority.

b) But on the way he met opposition and danger, which turned the trip into a far longer one than he had planned. He got to Greece and stayed for three months, but there learned of a plot against him. As a result he was forced to return back through Macedonia, a far longer land route to his destination (v.3). Then in v.16 we are told that he intended to go back to Ephesus, but he again

had his plans disrupted by a reported plot. Thus, by the end of all this, *"he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem".*

What advantage were these difficulties?

Certainly these dangers were very distressing for Paul and also very frustrating, since his plans and schedule were continually disrupted. Yet from our perspective we can see several ways in which God used all the delays. a) Generally, it means the churches received far more *"words of encouragement"* from Paul than he had planned (v.2) to give them. For example, the masterful "farewell to the Ephesian elders" that takes up the last part of this chapter would never have been delivered if Paul's plans had stood. God simply knew that these people needed more of Paul than he himself had thought. b) Particularly, the miraculous healing of Eutychus (v.7-12, see below) would never have occurred if Paul had not returned through Macedonia. c) Most commentators believe that Paul wrote the book of Romans while he was in Greece on this trip. (See F.F. Bruce, pp.404-405 for some of the evidence.) So perhaps we can even attribute our possession of that important work to the delays that gave Paul the time to write.

In Genesis, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, and as a result he rose up to be a great leader who saved his family and the nation. When he confronts them, he says *"you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good"*. (Gen.50:20). What a statement! It does not mitigate the evil intent and sinfulness of their actions, but insists that God's loving purposes cannot be thwarted by the them. In the same way, the enemies of Paul were used by God for good. This could not have been something Paul could see from his vantage point at the time, but we can see it from ours. When our life plans go seriously awry, do we remember Joseph's words and Paul's life?

2. vv.7-12. Why is Luke's story so detailed? How do the details tell us about what happened to Eutychus? What evidence is there that Luke is describing a resurrection, not a resuscitation? What do we learn here about early Christian worship?

Why is this so detailed an account?

This is an eyewitness account, because we have here a "we-passage" (v.7) indicating that Luke was present. As a result, he paints a very detailed picture of what happened.

How do the details tell us what happened?

First, we are told that Eutychus was a *neanias* (v.9) which is a general term for a young man, but v.12 calls him a *pais* which is usually used for someone 10-15. Second we are told enough about the conditions of the meeting to explain how he fell asleep. There was an evening meeting, still going at midnight (v.7), and it was a long meeting, in which Paul stalked *"on and on"* v.9 — an

unusually candid description of a common ministerial sin! Luke also mentions that there were *"many"* oil lamps going in that upper room, creating a stuffy atmosphere. The fact that Eutychus was sitting on the window ledge indicates that he had been fighting the tendency to fall asleep and had moved to the window to get some fresh air. As confirmation of this perception, we see that he *"was sinking into a deep sleep"* a verb form that is progressive, showing that it was a lengthy process. He fell asleep and fell to the ground from the third story, and when they ran down to him, to pick him up, he was dead (v.9). Paul ran down and immediately threw his body on the boy's body and embraced him, and said, *"don't fear! He is alive!"* (v.10). It is a very moving sight.

What evidence do we have that Luke was a miracle and not a resuscitation?

a) First, Luke says that when he was picked up, he was *dead.* The NEB translations says he was *"picked up as dead"*, because the translators think that this was no miracle. But the Greek text simply does not say that. It says he was dead. b) Second, Luke, a physician, was an eyewitness to the event, and he pronounces him *dead.* c) Third, the action of Paul with the boy is strongly reminiscent of Elisha's raising the dead boy in II Kings 4:32-33. The parallels are obvious. Many believe that the references to Paul prostration over Eutychus describe mouth to mouth resuscitation, but Elisha did the same physical action, and it was a resurrection, not a resuscitation. d) Last, we must ask why Luke would record a mere mistake and resuscitation? This is another of the miracles that Luke provides to show us that Paul was God's instrument.

What do we learn about early Christian worship?

a) This is the earliest reference we have that Christians met weekly on Sunday (*"the first day of the week"* v.7) for worship, not Saturday as the Jews had. If we wonder — why meet Sunday night? — we should remember that in that pre-Christian culture Sunday was not a "day off", and since many of the early Christians were slaves and servants, they would not have been free to meet in the morning. b) Secondly, on that day they *"broke bread"* which meant that they both ate together, and in that context, celebrated the Lord's Supper. (See Acts 2:42--where *"breaking the bread"* is clearly an act of Christian worship.) c) Third, we see that preaching was very much a part of the service. On first sight, it appears that it was an enormously long sermon — he spoke until daylight (v.11)! But John Stott points out that the word translated *"spoke"* in v.7 and 9 is the word *dialegomai* — to "dialogue" or discuss. And therefore, in addition to teaching, there would have been much more like a "Bible study" in which there were questions and answers and sharing of insights and experiences. But the word in v.11 for Paul's speaking is *homileo* (from which the old word "homily" or "sermon" comes). This was a sustained sermon.

The implications of this are important. We are to combine the Word and Sacrament of the Lord's Supper together in worship. Some people insist that this means we must have communion every time we preach the Word. But this

is a descriptive passage, not a passage that lays down guidelines and rules. Nevertheless, we should agree to a balance. "High" churches traditionally stress the sacrament and downplay the "homily" or preaching — "low" churches do it the other way around. Here we see the early church combined them.

3. Compare vv.17 and 28. What do we learn about how the early church was governed from these verses?

First, we learn the team-ministry form of early church government. The church at Ephesus was led by a team of leaders, not by a single minister or central executive. These are the *"elders"* and *"overseers"* — plural words, of course. John Stott (who is an Episcopalian) infers from this that *"there is no Biblical warrant either for the one-man-band (a single pastor playing all the instruments of the orchestra), or for a hierarchical or pyramidal structure in the local church (a single pastor perched at the apex of the pyramid). It is not even clear that each of the elders was in charge of an individual house-church. It is better to thin of them as a team, some perhaps with the over-sight of house churches, but others with specialist ministries according to their gifts, and all sharing the pastoral care of Christ's flock. We need today to recover this concept of a pastoral team in the church."*

Second, we learn the non-hierarchical form of early church government. There are three important words that all equally refer to the leaders of the Ephesian church — the word *presbyteroi* (v.17), *episkopoi* (v.28) and *poimenoi* (v.28). The word *presbyteroi,* from which the word "Presbyterian" comes, means "elders" — mature and wise. The NIV translation of the word *"episkopoi"* in v.28 is "overseers" — supervisors in authority. But the word "overseers" masks the import of the phrase. "Episkopoi", from which the word Episcopalian comes, means "bishops". Lastly, the word *poimenas* which is translated *"shepherd"* means "pastor". Now what does this mean? It means that in this church the bishops, the elders, and the pastors were all the same group. There is no concept of elders who sit as a kind of overseeing board but who don't pastor people. Nor is there the concept of one pastor who is paid by the elders to do all their ministry. Nor is there any indication that bishops were a "higher rank" than pastors who are a higher rank than elders.

We must be careful not to use this one passage to reject and condemn all contemporary forms of church government. Indeed, this passage shows that the Ephesian church operated differently to some degree than Presbyterian, Episcopalian and Catholic churches. We must remember that this is a descriptive passage, not a passage trying to lay out all the guidelines for church government. Perhaps other churches had other approaches to government. But we can learn important general principles. a) There must be team ministry in the church. b) We should not pay some one or two staff people to shepherd people. c) Government and discipline in the church should not belong to one autocratic leader.

4. vv.18-36. Make a list of the specific duties that Paul urges Christian leaders to do either by a) example, and/or b) direction.

By example:

First, he *preached* (v.20). This is primary — people need the truth, and he communicated it to them.

Second, he preached *anything that would be helpful to you* (v.20). He did not just preach whatever excited or intrigued him — but he chose and geared all his teaching to the personal needs of the people. That does not mean he only gave them what they wanted, but rather what they needed.

Third, he taught this truth in two ways: *"both —"*

a) *Publicly* in large group settings, worship services, and so on.

b) *From house to house,* probably both in informal home settings and in "house churches", which are like our small groups.

Fourth, he preached to both *Jews and Gentiles,* seeking not to neglect any people group, but to include all in the community of the King.

Fifth, he "majored on the majors" — *repentance* and *faith* (v.21), on *grace* and *the kingdom* (v.24-25).

Sixth, on the other hand, he did not *"hesitate to declare to you the whole will of God"* (v.27). This cannot mean "everything God knows" or even "everything in the Bible". (Keep in mind that he chose what was helpful — v.20). But coupled with the term *"not hesitate"* and *"I am innocent of your blood"*, we see that Paul means he did not shrink back from telling them the hard things and difficult aspects of the gospel as well as the blessings and glorious rewards. He did not candy coat what the gospel required.

By direction:

First, he tells them to *keep watch over yourselves* (v.28). He wisely puts this first. They cannot guard and nurture the spiritual life of others if they don't first do so with themselves!

Second, he tells them to "*keep watch over… all the flock"*. The word to "keep watch" and the characterization of the church as a "flock" point to the crucial job of the shepherd to guard the helpless sheep from predators. In the context of all the emphasis on teaching the Word of God accurately and courageously (v.28) and helpfully and practically (v.20), Paul must be concerned about "wolves" who are false teachers, who *"distort the truth"* (v.30). So they are being directed to guard the doctrine of the church. Remember — that means they are to see that the Bible is taught both accurately and helpfully. (It must be possible to be accurate and unhelpful)

Third, he tells them to *be shepherds of the church… which he bought with his own blood.* [Incidentally, this is one of the most direct and stunning places in

the Bible where Jesus is called "God" — because the church was bought with God's blood.] This direction can be paraphrased, "value and cherish the sheep". It means they are not simply to dispense good and right information, but to care tenderly and personal for the people, remembering their value to Jesus. After all — if he was willing to give of his blood sacrificially, why can you not give them of your time and energy sacrificially?

5. vv.18-36. Make a list of the specific character traits that Paul urges Christian leaders to have, either by a) example and/or b) direction.

By example:

First, he is not cowardly. Notice how twice he says he does not *"hesitate"* to minister the word (v.20 and v.27). He knows that he is bound for death, but he does not care (v.24).

Second, he is not arrogant. He directly talks of his *"humility"*, but then elaborates on what he means when he says he ministered *"with tears"* (v.19 and v.31). This is striking — his people knew that he did not "warn" and teach them because he was a "know it all", but rather because he loved them passionately and was willing to sacrifice everything for their benefit.

Third, he is not greedy. (v.33-34) It was clear to all that he was not in the ministry for the money. He also was an example of positive generosity to other (v.35).

By direction:

He directs them to grow through the Word of God. He tells them to grow through *the word of grace which is able to build you up* (v.32). This is a remarkable description of the gospel, the apostolic teaching. When we go to the Bible, we see a) it is all about grace as a central theme, and b) it has a vitality to grow and build us up spiritually.

Consider that these traits can be applied to anyone who is "leading" or caring for anyone else in the Christian community. They are requirements at any level. You need them if you are trying to help a new Christian grow, or to support a person who is hurting, or to lead a small group — as well as if you are leading a whole church. How are you doing at them?

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

The following is part of a series of sheets to give and discuss with friends who don't believe the Christian faith. This particular set of sheets is the most difficult. With many people, it would be good to skip some or all of them. But they will be absolutely necessary with a number of people, especially those who have thought through their objections to Christianity in a coherent way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**

4. **Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?**

C. WHY TO BELIEVE IN GOD (C-1)

An Overview

Let's recap. It is typical for people to say, "I'll believe in God if you can prove that he exists using reason and science". But God is a foundational concept, an "ultimate criterion" — for believers he is the way we explain and understand everything. Therefore, he cannot be proven any more than skeptics can "prove" their foundation, their "ultimate criterion" — namely that through reason and science we must explain and understand everything. No one can "prove" an ultimate criterion for truth without using it (or using another one). For example, if you say, "we can only be sure of what scientific observation proves" we can ask, "how do you know that, how can you 'prove' that?" You can't. Foundational concepts are assumed, and used to understand the world we see. Therefore, the way we test one foundation over another is by asking: "which view of the universe explains rationally what we see?" That is how we test scientific theories about entities that are not observable (such as quarks) — that is also how we also test faith-based worldviews, which we all have. When we put the theistic (believing in God) world view up against the non-theistic world view, we see that it makes much more sense of four things we see: **matter, morals, mind, music.**

Matter

What do we see? That the universe came into existence with a "Big Bang". That life would have been impossible on earth unless the fundamental constants of physics (the speed of light, the gravitational constant, the strength of weak and strong nuclear forces) were all calibrated to exactly as they are. If there is a God, the Big Bang and the beginning of organic life are perfectly rational and expected. If there is not a God, we would not expect them at all. These occurrences are (in such non-theistic world-view) highly unlikely — the chances are infinitesimally small. When the secularist says, "well, though there's no God, the universe and life just happened!" that means that though Christian world view DOES lead us to expect what we see, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we see (a big bang out of nothing, organic life out of inorganic) — why not change the premise?

Morality

What do we see? That we recognize some behavior as wrong absolutely, not just as a matter of opinion or taste or culture. If there is a God, the universal experience of a moral obligation, of moral outrage would be perfectly rational and expected. If there is not a God, we would not expect them at all. These things are (in a non-theistic world view) difficult to account for yet impossible to live without. When the secularist says, "well, though there's no God, some things are definitely wrong!" that means that though the Christian world view DOES lead to expect this experience and conviction, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway.

But if your premise/theory — that there is no God — does not lead you to expect what we know (that some things are wrong, that some laws are unjust despite what the populace says) — why not change the premise?

Mind

What do we see? That we reason by a) trusting our senses, b) expecting the uniformity of nature, and c) trusting laws of logic. If there is a God, who is rational and created and sustained a rationally ordered universe, then these things are expected, and even obligatory. If there is not a God, if the universe is random, just matter in motion, then we would not expect them at all. These things are (in a non-theistic world view) difficult to account for, yet impossible to avoid, for we can only deny these things by using them. When the secularist says, "well, though there is no God, we just know reason works", that means — that though Christian world view DOES lead us to expect what we see, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we know (that nature is uniform, not random, that our senses can be trusted) — why not change the premise?

Music

What do we see? That all natural, innate desires correspond to real objects that can satisfy them, such as sexual desire (corresponding to sex), physical appetite (corresponding to food), tiredness (corresponding to sleep), aesthetic desire (corresponding to beauty), relational desires (corresponding to friendship). That there exists in us a desire that nothing in time and space can satisfy, a desire for an unknown "something" that no amount of food, sex, friendship, success can satisfy. That human beings everywhere and at all times have been overwhelmingly religious, believing in something beyond the here and now that will fill the desire for that "something". Therefore, *"if I find in myself a desire which no experience in the world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."* (C.S. Lewis) The secularist says, the secularist says, "well, though there is no God, we just know that this is the one innate, deep, normal desire that has no object." That means — that though Christian world view DOES lead us to expect what we see, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we know (that the vast majority of people sense that there is another world) — why not change the premise?

Summary

Someone certainly has the right to say: "I don't want to be consistent — I'm just going to hold my views arbitrarily." Of course there is nothing that we said here that can compel or coerce anyone to believe. We should not even try to do that. But the point of our discussion is only to show that Christianity is more rational, that it makes more sense than non-theism. So to speak in this way is to concede that point.

Acts

Arrival at Jerusalem

Study 21 | Acts 21:1-26

INTRODUCTION

Up until this point, the story of Paul shows him very much "in control" of his life. He makes plans and sets goals and reaches them. He determines to go to certain places and plant churches in them and, in general, he does. But from the moment of his arrival in Jerusalem, Paul's life changes very radically. He is arrested and imprisoned and the rest of his *career* is really a set of reactions to the opposition and assaults of his enemies. Before he was on the offensive, now he is on the defensive. His history as given in Acts 13-20 follows three missionary journeys, but his history in Acts 21-28 is a series of five trials and what happened between them.

What was Luke's purpose in giving us such a detailed report of the (literal) trials and tribulations of St.Paul? a) Luke wants to encourage us to see that, though Paul was utterly vulnerable to both hostile enemies and indifferent government officials, God protected him and moreover used his vulnerability and sufferings to take the gospel to all sorts of places that it would have otherwise not gone. We know how much Paul wanted to take the gospel to Rome, the heart of the Gentile world. But look how he gets there — in chains! Doubtless he prayed often that God would open such a door, but did he ever imagine God would answer his prayer like this? So we learn about the goodness yet the sovereignty of God. b) Luke also wants to show how increasingly the gospel became something that pagan and Gentile people heard and accepted. Of all the gospel writers, Luke has the greatest desire to show the universal appeal and spread of the gospel — to all no matter what social condition, no matter what race or culture, no matter what psychological condition, no matter what moral condition. It is no surprise that the last journey of Paul (covered in Acts 21-28) is from Jerusalem to Rome. This is Luke's way to show us that, though the gospel begins in a particular time and place, in Jerusalem and Palestine, its destiny is to cover the whole earth.

1. **vv.1-9. What do we learn about a) the strength of Christian fellowship and b) the ways it is expressed and carried out? Can you share examples of how Christians you didn't know personally provided support and help for you?**

The teaching of these few verses is that we are to rejoice in and cling strongly to Christian friends. The importance of fellowship is seen in that Paul had to "tear himself" from the Ephesian Christians in v.1. The bonds were extremely strong. Furthermore, it is obvious that Paul was tremendously supported along the way by Christians he knew and those he did not know. The church at Tyre was probably the result of the dispersion of Christians after the death of Stephen. cf.11:19-20. But we have no indication the Paul was the founder. Yet the people were very eager to help and took him in with a great deal of warmth. This is a remarkable benefit to being a Christian — that you have

brothers and sisters all around the world that you can enter into fellowship with very quickly, on the basis of your common commitments

The way that fellowship is expressed here: a)First, through taking him into their homes and feeding him — hospitality. Paul receives Christian hospitality in at least four places (vv.4,7,8,16). Christians shared their possessions through open homes. b) Second, through visible, physical expressions of affection. It's impressive that we saw in 20:36 the disciples knelt to pray together, then embraced, kissed, and wept. Now in v.5 here we see that the Christians accompanied Paul out of the city with their whole families, and also knelt down together on the beach. All these are physical showings of solidarity. So Christians also shared their affection through open hearts. c) Third, through praying together v.5. Notice how often this happens! We could say that Christians shared their Christian faith through open spirits. They clearly talked about their relationship with Christ and spoke to him together, they worshipped together. Fourth, they sought the guidance of the Spirit together (v.4). Some of the Christians *"through the Spirit urged him not to go on"*. We will discuss the question this raises under question #3. But the point for now is to see that together they sought God's will. Therefore we can see that our faith is not just a "private" matter. It is for sharing and discussing. We find God's will together.

2. Look at Romans 12:13; Titus 1:8; I Peter 4:9,10; Heb.13:2; Lev.19:33-34; Acts 16:15. What do they tell you about a) the importance and b) the expression of hospitality among Christians. How can you practice it if you don't have a family or a spacious home?

The Christian grace and duty of hospitality is assumed all through this passage. When we do a little digging, we see that it was an extremely important part of the Christian lifestyle.

The importance

a) Required of leaders. Titus 1:8 shows the importance of hospitality — without this as a quality and a practice, a man could not be an elder in the church. b) One of the spiritual gifts. In I Peter 4:9-10, the close link between v.9 and 10 indicates that practicing hospitality was seen as spiritual gift, a ministry of *"God's grace in its various forms"* (The two verses could be read: "Exercise hospitality, and whatever your spiritual gift is, use it."). c) A fundamental response to God's hospitality. Peter's tells us that hospitality should be *"without grumbling"*, should be not a duty, but a response to the grace of God (cf.v.10) that we have experienced. This is beautiful, since Peter is intimating that our hospitality to others is analogous to God's hospitality to us. God has opened his home to us, making us part of his household (Gal.6:10). When Lydia becomes a Christian, hospitality is one of her first responses to the gospel (Acts 16:15), another indication that an open home goes along naturally with an open heart.

The expression

a) Romans 12:13–The link of *"share with… who are in need"* with hospitality shows that the basic principle of hospitality is really generosity with your material goods and resources. b) Lev.19:32-33, though it speaks of Israel's corporate hospitality to non-citizens and foreigners, gives us a very practical principle for our individual hospitality. We must treat guests "as one of your own". i.e. hospitality is not "entertaining", but receiving and accepting the guest as part of the family. c) Heb.13:2 shows us that we are to offer hospitality to people who are newcomers or otherwise not close friends. It means to be very open to new people — a hospitable person is very open to new relationships. (Note: It does not mean to open yourself to danger with people you know nothing about at all.) d) I Peter 4:9 says it should be without "grumbling". This means that the attitude and demeanor is as important in hospitality as the generosity with time and goods. Warmth, open-heartedness. e) I Peter 4:10 probably means that hospitality, while a duty for every Christian (Rom.12:9-13) and a natural response to God's grace (Acts 16:15) — is also a spiritual gift that some people are better at than others. It may mean that some people (who for example are more naturally extroverted and have a lower need for privacy) have a greater capacity for it than others. A person with a special gift of hospitality should be sure that he or she gets in a position to exercise it. **Note:** There are also different seasons in one's life in which hospitality is more of a possibility. It takes several kind of "margins": in order to be generous/hospitable, it means you must have the time, the money, and the emotional capital around to spend.

Summary: The Greek word translated "hospitality" means literally "love for strangers". Put a little differently, it means "a love for new people". It is a willingness to open your heart to new people and provide them with practical help out of your resources.

How do you exercise hospitality in a place like New York, where most of us are: a) single, without families, b) with tiny living spaces, c) unusually busy (compared to non-urban and non-New York people)?

First, we should acknowledge the fact that NYC conditions mean that there is more of a *need* for hospitality here than nearly anywhere else. Why? There is no place on earth, probably where there are more "new people" (the subject of hospitality). There is a constant river of new people coming to the city, and these newcomers are in far more need of guides to the environment than are new residents in other cities. NYC is much more complex and distinct from the rest of the country, and the just-arrived would benefit so much from hosptitality. But then there are a constant stream of people into our lives who are new to us. Again that happens so often in New York. If you have lived here for some years, you are constantly saying "good-bye" to people, and you are constantly going through changes of job, neighborhood, and social patterns. In other words, people in New York are continually in need of new friends. So many

people in New York do not live in families themselves, and therefore are much more emotionally affected by these changes. Thus they are greatly helped by warm welcomes and supportive, personal environments.

But we also should admit that NYC (especially Manhattan) also creates more difficulties for hospitality than any other place. Like — who has a *home?* (Remember homes? Lawns? You know. Houses.) However, if we study the texts we see that the principles of hospitality are universal. Here's how we can apply them:

1. The essence of hospitality is welcome and openness. Openness of heart is the basic spirit of hospitality. You need to be very non-suspicious, very open to a new face, very warm and ready to listen and help. (At Redeemer there is a great need for people to greet and meet people--from being an usher to working the "New to New York" table, or "Redeemer Link".) You will be doing an important ministry if, with the Biblical paradigm of grace-and-welcome in your mind, you do fairly simple actions of greeting and welcome to that constant flow of new faces. Remember, hospitality is "love for new people".
   It is the willingness to make new friends.
2. The other essential principle of hospitality is generosity with material things. The idea is practical help, to put your practical resources at the service of someone new. So one example would be to spend some of your precious time (without grumbling) to orient a person to how to get around the city. Another example is to take someone out to eat (to a good but economically priced restaurant!) This is just as much an act of Christian hospitality as to put someone up overnight in a home. Many of us simply have no place in our living quarters to provide lodging — but there is nothing in the Biblical definition of hospitality that necessitates that you have a house or family in order to do it. On the other hand, having people into our apartments for coffee or for just a good talk can be a great way to welcome a new person.

3. Is Paul disobeying the Spirit (v.4 and 10-11) by continuing on toward Jerusalem (v.14)? Cf. with 20:22-23.

At first glance, the messages from the Spirit seem to have contradicted one another. In Acts 20:22 Paul says that he is going to Jerusalem *"compelled by the Spirit"*. In other words, the Spirit was telling him to take the journey. Yet in Tyre, some disciples warned Paul *"through the Spirit"* (21:4) not to go to Jerusalem. Then Agabus begins a prophecy *"The Holy Spirit says…"* and then proceeds to warn Paul that he will be imprisoned in Jerusalem (though this prophecy was not a direct request to avoid the journey, as in 21:4. But Paul refused to change his course, and resisted the messages, though they were

brought in the power of the Spirit and with loving tears (21:13-14). Was Paul refusing the Spirit? But that is not the right question — since Paul says that the Spirit himself was leading him to Jerusalem (20:22), so the question is: was the Spirit contradicting himself?

The first possible answer we can rule out is the possibility that the Spirit really was contradicting himself. The second interpretation we can rule out is that Paul was disobeying the Spirit. Why can we eliminate these? Not on the basis of some dogmatic pressupposition, but on the basis of a common sense approach to Luke himself. Unless he was incredibly unperceptive (which he manifestly was not), Luke could not have understood this as a real conflict. Luke certainly would know that readers would not believe the Holy Spirit could contradict himself, and since he records all this without a comment, he obviously did not understand it as such. So in his mind (and Paul's) there was nothing inconsistent here. Also, anyone can see there that Luke greatly admires Paul's courage and integrity here — he is holding him up as an example for us. Thus Luke would not want us to understand this action of Paul as any disobedience to God at all. Neither Luke nor Paul understood it as such. It is therefore our job to understand how it fits together — but we must realize that the incoherence is due to our limited understanting.

A third solution is possible but also very unlikely. That is to conclude that the speakers in 21:4 only thought they were inspired by the Spirit, although they were not. The trouble with that interpretation is that then we would be forced to question every straightforward statement of the Spirit's influence as only the subjective *belief* by the persons that the Spirit was influencing them. How could we be sure we are understanding anything then that Luke says?

Virtually the only possible solution is this: that while the Spirit was giving them real insight about Paul's future suffering, their interpretation of what he should be doing about it was mistaken. John Stott says:

> "…Luke's statement is a condensed way of saying that the warning was divine while the urging was human. After all, the Spirit's word to Paul combined the compulsion to god with a warning of the consequences (20:22-23)"
>
> – Stott, p. 333.

In other words, Paul had also been shown that he would suffer in Jerusalem, but along with that warning was a leading of the Sprit that he should go anyway, that the sufferings would be used by God. Agabus also was shown that Paul would suffer there. But the Tyre Christians concluded from this that he should not go. They were wrong. They warned him *"through the Spirit"*. In other words, their Spirit-engendered insight about his fate moved them to urge him not to go. Stott points out that, if Paul had heeded the Tyrian Christians, then Agabus' prophecy would not have been fulfilled, and he would have been a false prophet! Thus the loving Christians of Tyre were obviously wrong in what they extrapolated from their insights.

This is an extremely instructive incident for us. We must never give counsel or advice with divine authority unless it is the plain teaching of the Bible. For example, you can tell your married friend, "you must break off your extra-marital adulterous affair! There is no doubt about it, this is not my opinion, God says so." Or you can say, "you must forgive your mother! There is no doubt about it, this is not my opinion, God says so." However, when it comes to advice about life choices in areas where the Bible has not spoken, we must always offer our advice with humility and allow it to be open to contradiction and discussion. We can never say: "God has shown me that you should leave your church and go to this one. God wants you to stop dating this woman. There is no doubt about it." and so on. We can even perhaps say, "I have felt a burden to speak to you about this — but I could be wrong, or partially wrong. Nevertheless but I feel pretty clear about this in my own mind. Here it is…" The incident in 21:4 shows that you can have real divine insight from God about a person's situation and still misunderstand how to apply it! And if the Tyrian Christians could have spiritual-given wisdom and still get it wrong, it must be possible to be completely wrong in our advice, even if it is loving and well-meaning (as theirs obviously was).

At the present time, many Christians take it upon themselves to invoke divine wisdom for their advice, and it is very dangerous. If you say to me, "God has shown me that you need to quit this job" — well, there is not any possibility for discussion! Instead of seeking God's will together in fellowship with you, I either have to accept what you say as God's word, or I have to reject you as a false prophet. It is clear here the Christians were not shocked and offended that Paul resisted their advice, they were only saddened. This is important. If they really believed that their insights were infallible revelations from God, then surely they would have challenged Paul as being disobedient to God. But the fact they were not outraged showed that spiritual insights were offered to one another humbly, in the knowledge that they might be only partially right in their interpretation and application.

In general, this is probably indicating that New Testament "prophets" (see Acts 21:9) were not like the Old Testament prophets who brought us the Scriptures. NT prophets had to be judged and evaluated by the higher authority of the apostolic teaching (see I Cor.14:29-33, 36-38).

4. vv.17-26. What signs were there that James' "Jewish" Christianity and Paul's "Gentile" Christianity were compatible? If so, what is the problem here, the point of difficulty?

James was still the recognized leader of the church in Jerusalem and also of the world-wide Jewish Christian movement. It is interesting, considering that today Christianity is considered strictly non-Jewish, that we are told *"many thousands of Jews have believed"* (v.20). The church in Jerusalem was a

"mega-church", and a significant percentage of Jerusalem had become Christian. This was the fourth meeting between James and Paul, the leaders of Jewish and Gentile Christianity, respectively. John Stott says:

> "Some people were doubtless asserting that the doctrinal positions of James and Paul were incompatible, as they had done before the Jerusalem Council (15:1-2), [they said that] Paul taught salvation by grace, and James salvation by works. Hence later Luther's uneasiness, which led him to dub the Letter of James an 'epistle of straw'. "
>
> – Stott, p.339

However, we see here that while the perspectives and emphases of James and Paul were different, there is no fundamental incompatibility. First, v.17 Paul was *"received… warmly"*. Second, James and the elders heard the detailed report of Paul's ministry, and they *praised God* with them (v.20a). There is not only no sign of disapproval, but a great rejoicing. Third, we see that James is not like the "Judaizers" who believe that all people must obey the law of Moses in order to be saved (see Acts 15). Rather, he is only concerned that Christian Jews stay true to the Mosaic law. We see this in v.21-22 where he clearly tells Paul that the only concern is whether *"the Jews who live among the Gentiles"* are being encouraged to turn from the law of Moses. The language of James in this verse shows that he believes that Paul is not doing this. Now, if James is only concerned that Jewish Christians still observe the law of Moses, he must consider such observance an cultural expression, not a requirement for salvation. The word James uses for the Mosaic teaching is very telling — *"customs"* (v.21)l. James and the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 had agreed that salvation was by grace through faith, and therefore one did not need to be circumcized in order to be saved.

In summary, James and Paul both agreed that no one was saved by circumcision and obeying the law (cf. Acts 15). On the other hand, they believed that the moral law was something every Christian now obeyed out of gratitude (cf. Rom.7:12; 8:4; James 1:25; 2:8). The point of contention was only this: "should Jewish Christians continue to observe the Jewish cultural customs of their heritage?" Paul was reputed to have told Jews to not do so.

5. vv.22-26. What does James recommend as a solution? How does Paul's action here reflect principles he himself has laid down elsewhere? (cf. Acts 20:24; I Cor.9:20-23; 10:32,33) How might these same principles affect our own attitudes toward others? Provide some specific example.

James speaks of four men who have taken a Nazirite vow (cf. Numbers 6:1ff; Acts 18:18ff.) In this rite, a person would refrain from drinking wine or cutting his hair for a period of time, after which the hair was cut and burned along with other sacrifices. It was similar to what people seek to accomplish through a fast — it is a way of offering one's heart and will to God in a particularly strong way. The Nazirite vow was part of the Mosaic law. James asks Paul to join them and

pay the temple fees that accompanied the offerings. This would show everyone that he was still a "practicing Jew" who observed the Mosaic legislation.The second part of James' plan is to be sure that the Gentiles accompanying Paul were very careful to stick with the plan provided by the Jerusalem Council. There were four cultural practices (see our discussion of Acts 15) which were not wrong in themselves for Gentiles to do, but which they were asked to avoid out of sensitivity to Jewish believers.

Paul's response was to do exactly what James asked (v.26). Now we know that Paul himself was willing to abandon Jewish custom, even for himself, when it meant reaching out more effectively to Gentiles (I Cor.9:20), or then to adopt it fully (as here) when it meant helping Jews and Gentiles to live and work together in solidarity (as when he had the half-Gentile Timothy circumcised in Acts 16:2). What does this show us? To Paul, cultural practices are matters from which he had been completely liberated — so liberated that he was not offended or disdainful of them, nor enslaved to them. Sometimes people think they have been "liberated" from cultural practices, but their bitterness and contempt for them mean that now they could not engage in them, even if it would help a relationship. That was not the case for Paul. *"A truly emancipated spirit such as Paul's is not in bondage to its own emancipation"*. (Bruce, p.432). Paul was not compromising here at all, but acting in accord with his own principles as stated in I Cor. 9). The gospel frees us from cultural customs so we are not able to use or not use them for the purposes of fellowship and mission.

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

The following is part of a series of sheets to give and discuss with friends who don't believe the Christian faith. This particular set of sheets is the most difficult. With many people, it would be good to skip some or all of them. But they will be absolutely necessary with a number of people, especially those who have thought through their objections to Christianity in a coherent way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**

4. **Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?**

C. WHY TO BELIEVE IN GOD (C-1)

The "Matter" Argument for God
One of the things we see when we look at the universe is order and design. There's a road out of Tennessee that passes a hillside with a set of rocks that spell out "Welcome to Georgia". Though these hundreds of rocks could have fallen into this pattern by chance,without an intelligent designer, it would be irrational to conclude that they did. Yet the structure and order of the human brain, or of the solar system itself, is billions of times more intricate.

"But doesn't evolution explain the design and structure of organisms?"
Evolution can only deal with *organic* design and it assumes the orderly forces of nature that even allow 'natural selection' to allow fit species to survive. Today, physicists tell us of the astonishing "fine tuning" of the universe that some call 'the Anthropic principle'. Life would have been impossible on earth unless all the fundamental constants of physics (the speed of light, the gravitational constant, the strength of weak and strong nuclear forces) were calibrated exactly as they are. For example, if the universe had expanded even a miniscule measure faster or slower (after the Big Bang), life would never have occured. The chances are extremely small that all this happned by accident.

"But what if there have been a countless series of universes over time and we just happen to find ourselves in the one conducive to life?"
Of course, our argument is "probabilistic" and it is possible that we just happened to find ourselves here. But Alvin Plantinga shows how irrational it is to live upon such a possibility. He asks us to imagine "Tex" dealing himself 10 straight hands of four aces in a game of poker. What if he said, "I know it looks suspicious! But what if there is an infinite succession of universes, so that for any possible distribution of possible poker hands, there is a universe in which that possibility is realized: we just happen to find ourselves in one where I always deal myself 4 aces without cheating?" It would be irrational to assume that Tex is not cheating, though you cannot prove the remote possibilty wrong. But the "fine tuning" of the universe is far less probable than 10 straight winning hands of 4 aces! While all the elements of design could have happened by chance, without an intelligent Creator, is it rational to live as if that remote chance must be true, just because no one can prove that it is not?

"But maybe the order we see is merely a product of our minds?"
This question puts you in a very awkward position. You are proposing that our minds are playing tricks on us, yet you want us both to use our minds to see it. You say, "maybe there is no order and intelligibility" but then why should our thinking be orderly about it?

notes

Conclusion

The non-theists, then, are essentially saying: "well, though there's no God, the universe and life just happened!" that means that though Christian world view does lead us to expect what we see, and the non-theistic world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we see (a big bang out of nothing, organic life out of inorganic) — why not change the premise?

C-2

The "Morality" Argument for God
One of the things we see when we look at life is an inescapable sense of moral obligation. This is more than saying that there are moral "values" or moral feelings. All people know it is right to be generous, kind, honest, courageous, and fair — and wrong to be selfish, cruel, deceptive, cowardly and unjust. But what we mean by "right" is not merely that we feel good about such actions, but that people are obligated to them no matter what they feel about them. An obligation is objective, not subjective — it is "there" no matter what anyone thinks of feels about it. But if there is no God, it is very hard to see where these objective obligations come from.

"But I don't believe in objective moral obligation. Every moral statement in only an expression of the subjective feelings of the speaker".
Consider what you do when you affirm that there are no objective moral obligations. You are saying, "you ought not to evaluate me by your moral principles". But to say this you are pressing an obligation upon me that you are appealing to, that is outside of me, to which you say I ought to be accountable. Why? Now if there is a God who created a moral order, so that we are accountable to him and it, then surely it is fair to say, "we ought to be reasonable and tolerant". But if there is no objective moral obligation, how can you even make an argument? If you cannot deny objective moral obligation without using it, then you should admit that you do see it and believe in it.

"But isn't morality just a product of cultures and relative to them?"
The problem for those who espouse relativism is that they cannot avoid comparing cultures. Do you think that it was a good thing for America to abolish slavery? Are you critical of any ethical practices in your own culture? Do you think that child sacrifice was a bad thing? The only way you can do so is by appealing to objective moral obligations to which others are as bound as yourself.

"But isn't our sense of morality a product of evolution? It helped us survive."
One problem with this view is that it is difficult to prove that unselfishness, kindness, fairness are genetic traits that help one survive! But the problem is that the evolutionary theory can only account for moral feelings, not moral obligations. If a person says, "but there are not moral obligations, only evolved, genetically based moral feelings" that means that they espouse that murder and rape are not truly wrong, only impractical. But the one espousing this shows the very next moment that he or she does not believe it. They should never be morally outraged or hold anyone responsible for rape and murder.

They should not ever hold people morally responsible for swindling and cheating. If our actions show that we believe certain acts to be objectively wrong despite our internal psychology, we show that we don't believe the evolutionary model to be true.

"But maybe there just are moral obligations. How does that prove God?"
This is a weak argument. What it is saying is: "while the view that there is a Creator God would lead us to expect moral obligations, and the view that there is no God would not lead us to expect it, I am going to hold to an atheistic viewpoint anyway". Moral obligations in a world without God mean that the atheistic world would be absurd. Here you have unavoidable obligations to do things that will give you no benefits in this life at all. Honesty and courage and love are often extremely impractical, leading to diminishment of money, health, even the end of life. Why would such obligations have ever arisen in a world where death is the end of everything?

Conclusion
We know that napalming babies, starving the poor, raping the vulnerable, and buying and selling people is wrong — does not just feel wrong. But if your premise [that there is no God] leads you to a conclusion that you know isn't true [namely that these things only feel wrong, but are not wrong] why not change the premise?

Acts
Paul's arrest and defense

Study 22 | Acts 21:27 - 22:29

1. 21:27-36. Trace the parallels between Paul's suffering and Christ's? In what way is this instructive for us personally?

There are a number of ways in which the treatment given to Paul and given to Christ were similar. a) First, we see that Paul came to Jerusalem though he knew he would suffer there. In the same way Jesus came to Jerusalem knowing he would be killed there. b) Second, Paul at the temple is accused of *"teaching against… our law and this place"* (v.28). In the same way Jesus was accused of speaking against the temple, saying that he would make it obsolete. c) Third, Paul was beaten to within an inch of his life by those who accosted him. Jesus, of course, was also beaten. d) Fourth, though the Jews apprehended Paul, he was dealt with by Roman law, Roman jurisprudence. As we will see, Paul like Christ has both a trial before the Sanhedrin and a trial before Roman judges. d) Fourth, even the crowd's cries are the same with both Paul and Christ — *"Away with him!"* e) Fifth, Paul was accused of bringing Gentiles into the temple area. That was illegal, and the Romans gave the Jews the power to kill any Gentile that came into the Temple, even if that person was a Roman citizen. In the same way, Jesus was attacked for eating with and receiving "sinners", tax collectors, Gentiles.

It has often been pointed out that Luke wants to draw out the similarities between Paul's sufferings in Jerusalem and Christ's. But why? Is Luke simply trying to glorify Paul, making him a divine figure, get us to give him some sort of super-veneration? Let's give Luke more credit than that. There is no indication that Luke thinks Paul's sufferings redeem us in anyway! Rather, Luke may be trying to remind us that <u>all</u> Christians have to expect some overflowing of the pattern of Christ's life into our own. Every Christian will have to "take up the cross and follow" Christ (Matt.16:24). What does that mean? It means, that if we simply obey Christ, at various points we will suffer <u>because</u> we are obeying. Paul says, *"the sufferings of Christ overflow into our lives"* (II Cor.1:5). How? Sometimes telling the truth, or giving love to someone will result in loss. Sometimes we become vulnerable because we are obeying Christ instead of looking out for our own self-interest. Other times we will suffer persecution by others for our Christian profession. Paul makes a remarkable categorical statement that *"<u>all</u> who live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"*. (II Tim.3:12). It means that, even in a society that allows religious freedom, if we are not cowards about admitting our faith, we will sometime be the victims of bias or prejudice at least, if not outright attack and assault.

So, in the end, the parallels of Paul with Christ are not to show us how exceptional Paul is as a Christian, but how <u>un</u>exceptional he is. Jesus said, *"All men will hate you because of me… a student is not above his master."* (Matt.10:22,24).

2. 21:30-39. What does it tell us about Paul that he would turn and speak to the mob when he did?

We cannot fail to ask this question, because it tells us so much about Paul. We need to remember that the rioters had been beating Paul (21:32), trying to kill him. They charged him falsely, with deeds he had not done. He had only been rescued in the nick of time because the soldiers from the nearby garrison learned of the riot and intervened in the nick of time (v.31-32). Paul could not have been more than five minutes from his death when he was rescued. The disappointed crowd, robbed of their prey, pressed forward as Paul was being led away, and was only restrained by the force of the soldiers.

Now we know two things about how Paul felt. First, when we are attacked as viciously as he was attacked, there are deep instincts within us released. They are instincts of anger and fear that enable us to fight back or run. Surely he was in an extremely aroused state of either enormous anger or enormous fear, or both. Second, since the crowd was pressing in on Paul, despite the presence of the military escort, he would have known he was still in acute danger. A crazed crowd could overwhelm a small entourage of soldiers if it was agitated enough. Now in light of the anger and fear of Paul and in light of the continued danger — it is stunning that Paul asks permission to speak to the crowd about the gospel.

First, why would he care enough for them to want to share his faith with them? Maybe after some time for Paul's anger and fear to subside, he might still want to win them to Jesus — but it is amazing that he conquered those feelings and had such compassion for people that he could call a group of men who had just tried to kill him "brothers" and then calmly and respectfully urge them to hear the message of Jesus. This is a kind of love that really is remarkable. Second, why would he trust enough, why would he risk his neck to share his faith with them, when the danger was so high? The only answer is that Paul saw an opportunity to talk to an assembled crowd in Jerusalem, and he knew very well that he would not be able to have this opening again. Pual was so eager and hungry for opportunities to share his faith, he was wiling to risk his life in a most unpromising situation.

In summary, the love and courage of Paul was enormous by this point in his life. He had reached a plain of belief in the gospel that very few others (if any) attain.

3. 22:1-22. How is Paul's speech well-designed for its audience and the situation?

First, Paul's defense does not consist of a reasoned discourse or even a general sermon — it is a very vivid personal testimony. He details his past, his personality and background, and how his encounter with Christ had turned Christianity's greatest enemy into its greatest propagator. Considering the circumstances, it is unlikely that anything less personal could have grabbed the

attention of an agitated, hostile mob. This is a strong reminder that people who will not or cannot concentrate on an argument are quickly and immediately interested in a story, a personal narrative. It shows us the power of a personal testimony.

Second, the use of Aramaic, rather than Greek, was very wise, even cagey. v.2 notes how its use had an immediate pacifying effect on the mob. Aramaic was the vernacular of Jews in Palestine, and therefore it showed deference to Jewish culture. By using it, he was essentially hiding the conversation from the Romans and foreigners present. Here he was addressing a group of Jews who felt that they were being culturally violated and overrun by unclean outsiders, and so his choice of their language was a sign of great respect. Some have noted that many *diaspora* Jews (Jews who lived outside of Judea but who came back for religious observance) did not know Aramaic as well — they ordinarily spoke Greek. Therefore, speaking in Aramaic required that they listen rather attentively. Going into Aramaic, therefore, was an extremely shrewd way of calming this crowd down.

Third, everything about the early part of the testimony serves to show the crowd how much Paul is "one of them". He shows his deep roots in the Jewish faith and culture and his respect for and loyalty to them. He calls them *"brothers and fathers"*. He stresses his Jewish upbringing in Jerusalem, he talks of his training in *the law of our fathers* under Gamaliel (v.3). These credentials were impressive and impeccable. It would have surprised, even shocked many in the crowd. Here is someone who had been in the inner circle of Jewish guardians of the faith and culture.

Fourth, Paul goes on to say that he was, frankly, just as violently fanatical for his faith and people as the violent mob was that day. *"I was… just as zealous for God as any of you are today"*. (v.3) Look how far Paul is going to be generous. He is describing their mob action as being "zealous for God". Talk about "looking at something positively"! He gives them credit for their motivation. From one vantage point, their actions were abusive, violent, impulsive, and bigoted. But Paul discerned in their heart a foundational passion to honor the holy God of their followers, and so he is willing to call what they are doing *today* an expression of being zealous for God. He says that he persecuted Christianity (v.4-5) out of a desire to serve God. So he is saying in the strongest terms: "I once was exactly where you are today. I understand exactly how you feel now. The priest and Council can attest to it (v.5)". Not only is this very disarming, but he is being a great story teller. Anyone listening has to be wondering, "then what could have possibly turned *you* into a Christian?"

Fifth, Paul then tells the story of his vision and encounter with Christ. Here he slows the pace of the story down so that he is describing the actual dialogue between himself and Christ.(vv.6-14). The dramatic effect is strong and no one could have failed to have been drawn in. Certainly, some in the crowd would have not only been touched personally, but would have been confronted with a rather powerful piece of evidence. If this did <u>not</u> happen, how do we account for the about-face of someone so much like us, so zealous for the God of our fathers?

Sixth, we see Paul only begins to bring up the less palatable parts of his message gradually. He decided to begin with all the things his crowd and he could agree on. He began with all the ways they could identify with him and he with them. Then he finally moves to those parts of his message that were challenging to their views. He avoids the implications of Jesus Christ for Gentiles for a good while. It is not until verse 15 that he speaks of going to *all men* — and Paul makes it clear that it was *the God of our fathers* who had sent the gospel out. Even in this verse, he avoids using the term "Gentiles". But finally he gets to that hated term in v.21, and the crowd explodes. He never finishes the speech.

4. **How is Paul's speech specifically instructive for us? Have you had experiences in which someone became very offended by what you said about your faith? In light of this passage, was the reason for that mainly in you or mainly in them (or both)?**

How is it instructive for us?

a) First, we must learn the incredible balance of Paul in communication.

(1) On the one hand, there is amazing boldness that Paul showed. Paul did not have to turn and try to witness to a mob that had just beaten him within an inch of his life (see question #2). So we see he had courage and was willing to take any opportunity to speak. We too then must we willing to take some initiative. We do not have to wait for someone to say, "you are a Christian — tell me all about it — please, please!" Some Christians won't take initiative unless there is that level of invitation. We need to be bolder than that.

(2) On the other hand, we see Paul being enormously generous and flexible with his communication. He avoids all unnecessary offense. He clearly shows great respect for the world-view and life of his audience. He not only identifies with them, but he complements on their good points and ignores (for the moment) their bad points! At least, that is how he starts. He gives them credit for all their good motives and leaves their bad ones aside. Of course, in the end, he tells them all they should know, but he stresses the positive and the inoffensive at first, and only gradually moves to the difficult. This combination of courage and deep sensitivity is extremely rare. We either refuse to say anything, or we speak offensively.

b) Second, we learn that even the greatest effort at gospel communication can fail. Though Paul make absolutely every possible attempt to avoid offense, the crowd literally ignited (and perhaps, got worse). So we may find that, despite all our work, people still reject our message and may even be very hostile to us. If we get through our lives as Christians without ever upsetting or offending anyone, we have not ministered with integrity.

Our experiences

Many of us had situations in which people were offended when we tried to talk about our faith. Often these incidents were with family members. (Thousands of college students have come home from campus to offend their parents deeply by informing them that, despite having grown up in their family church, they had only just now "become Christians"!) But there have been other incidents. To analyze what happened, ask yourself if a) you were flexible and as inoffensive as Paul, and if b) you were as compassionate as Paul. Paul's motive here was obviously not to win the argument, but to win the hearts. Was that your motive? Did you work hard at "giving credit where credit was due"? After all, Paul tells this murderous crowd that he knew they really were trying to honor God. Have you given people who didn't believe the gospel credit for what they are doing right?

On the other hand, realize that even if you were as great as St.Paul, many people will still want to kill you! (Maybe, if we were as great as St.Paul, there would be more people who would want to kill you than there are now.)

5. 22:22-29. Compare these verses with 16:22,23,37-39. Why does Paul mention his citizenship to avoid the flogging here, when he did not do so in Phillipi? How is this instructive for us?

After the "failure" of Paul's speech, the garrison commander decided to get to the bottom of who Paul was through the time honored method of interrogation-through-flogging. A Roman scourge was more than a whip. It was a set of leather thongs with pieces of metal and bone on thei ends, attached to a wooden handle. The flagellation ripped the skin and flesh off a person's back and limbs — it was often fatal.

Roman citizenship was not something that all people in the empire had. It was something given to free-born members of many cities (it could also be bought or earned through government service). But the law, a Roman citizen could not be punished by scourging (or even by most kinds of imprisonment) without a hearing or trial. Paul's announcement of his citizenship immediately stops the flogging and even calls into question of the legality of Paul being *"in chains"* (v.29).

This is, in some ways, a trick question! We don't know why Paul in this situation avoided the flogging and in Phillipi did not. *"He seems for some reason not to have wanted to take advantage of being a citizen except in some dire extremity"*. (Stott, p.349-350). We could spend time speculating, spinning out plausible scenarios in which Paul could have had reasons for not avoiding punishment. But they would all be highly speculative. What we do learn is that Paul did not automatically demand his rights. Self-interest and comfort was not his highest priority, rather it was the honor and promotion of the gospel.

Are we willing to give up our rights for the higher priority of Christian fellowship (as Paul obviously did in Acts 21, when he gave up his right to freedom from Mosaic customs for the sake of others)? The principles behind this are seen in Romans 12:14-21. On the other hand, are we willing to give up our rights for the higher priority of Christian mission (as Paul obviously did continually in his journeys)? The principles behind this are seen in I Cor.9:12, 20 and context. Does this mean that we are never to assert our rights? No — we see Paul doing it here. The point is, when we demand justice, it is for the honor of Christ or the concern of my neighbor or brother — it is never naked self assertion. In general, it is not loving to let someone sin against you; it is never loving to make it easy for someone to sin against you habitually. An unwillingness to speak up against it is probably cowardice or indifference. If you love the person who is caught in the sin (cf. Gal.6:1) and want to honor Christ whose law is being trampled on, we will regularly speak out when we are being violated — but never, never out of revenge and a desire to pay back or assert our power. (Ironically, many people hold a grudge and don't speak out when they are wronged — the Bible demands the exact opposite! We are to speak out but without an ounce of ill will.) But there will be times in which we will not assert our rights, when we know both God's cause is better promoted or loving unity is better promoted when we keep our mouths shut.

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

The following is part of a series of sheets to give and discuss with friends who don't believe the Christian faith. This particular set of sheets is the most difficult. With many people, it would be good to skip some or all of them. But they will be absolutely necessary with a number of people, especially those who have thought through their objections to Christianity in a coherent way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**

4. **Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?**

C. WHY TO BELIEVE IN GOD (CONT.) C-3

The "Mind" Argument for God

One of the things that we see is that our minds *work,* that our sense perception and rational intuition help us perceive the real world. But if there is no God, and everything has a physical, natural cause, then we are led to some very disturbing conclusions about our own minds. Thoughts of the brain are only the results of non-rational, non-intelligent chemical processes in the brain. Neuroscientists today tell us that all thinking is the product of chemicals which are the product of our genetic code, brought to us by the long process of evolution. Therefore all our thinking and choices are pre-determined — there is no real freedom of thought. This is an inescapable conclusion of the belief that there is no God or eternal reality. But if our thoughts are not free and rational, but determined, then so are the thoughts that espouse this view, in which case we cannot trust them — they are only conditioned responses. And so we are in the position of listening to a man who says, "don't trust a word I am saying". You have to dismiss that sentence as self-refuting nonsense — failing to satisfy its own criteria of acceptability. Any view of the universe which would make it impossible to trust our thinking or minds to tell us about reality hast to be dismissed.

"But surely the process of evolution has given us minds that we can trust, for we could not have survived unless they told us about reality."

Evolutionary biology is no help here at all. Darwinian theory is that absolutely every capacity we have is due to a process called "natural selection", in which those traits that help us adapt to our environment are passed along genetically (since only those with those traits survive). Our minds therefore were not designed by a Creator to perceive the real world, they are produced by a blind process that helps us survive in the world. Now we cannot possibly know that perceiving reality leads to surviving, only that what we perceive leads to surviving. For example, we know that "psychological" survival needs regularly lead us to repress or deny realities. If it is too painful to acknowledge how angry someone is or how hurt someone is through our behavior, we may complete deceive ourselves about it — just refuse to "see" it. What proof have we that the same thing has not happened to our capacities for perceiving the physical world. The simple fact is that evolutionary theory says the purpose of our minds is physical survival, not the production of true beliefs, and therefore it gives us no reason to trust our minds — quite the contrary. In fact, Darwin himself admits this, when he wrote: *"The horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of a man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there were any convictions in such a mind?"* At best evolution makes us agnostic about our minds, which means we should then be agnostic about evolution itself, and everything else.

"But maybe our minds just emerged and do 'work' — why do we have to have a God for that?"

This raises an additional problem for the non-theistic world-view. The main reason our minds help us understand the world is what has been called "the uniformity of nature". The method of generalizing from observed cases to all cases of the same kind is called "induction". Without it, we would not be able to learn from experience, we would not be able to use language, we would not be able to rely on memory or advance science, all of which involve observing similarities and projecting them into the future. Now if we set the theistic view next to the non-theistic (which sees the universe as the production of random matter-in-motion) and ask: "which view best comports with the inductive principle?" we have to conclude that it isn't the non-theistic view.

Conclusion

So we see the severe problems with non-theistic thinking — it cannot account for itself! It is belief in God that provides us the necessary pre-conditions for trusting our minds at all, or accounting for why induction and deduction and sense perception works at all. Rational mind appears to be a reality (and to deny it is self-defeating), yet how do we account for it unless there is a rational mind behind the universe? Some say, "though there is no God, I just know that reason works". What that means is: "though your world-view does lead us to expect what we see and mine does not, I am going to hold it anyway." But if our premise (that there is no God) leads to a conclusion that is completely impossible to hold (that we cannot trust our minds, including the thought that we cannot trust our minds), why not question the premise?

C-4

The "Music" Argument for God

One of the things that we see in the world is that great art makes us feel that there is meaning in life, that love is real, that somethings are valuable. For example, Leonard Bernstein said, "Listening to Beethoven's Fifth, you get the feeling there's something right with the world, something that checks throughout, something that follows its own laws consistently, something we can trust, that will never let us down." This is a simple fact of experience. We all disagree on which art is "great" and which art affects us like this, but we all experience it. But if there is no God, love is an illusion — it is just a function of my brain chemistry, and beautiful music is also an illusion — it is just the way my nervous system is designed. Either there is a God, or love and beauty is an absolute illusion. C.S.Lewis put it quite well:

> "Let us suppose that Nature is all that exists… you can't, except in the lowest animal sense, be in love with a girl if you know (and keep on remembering) that all the beauties both of her person and of her character are a momentary and accidental pattern produced by the collision of atoms, and that your own response to them is only a sort of psychic phosphorescence arising from the behavior of your genes. You can't go on getting very serious pleasure from music if you know and remember that its air of significance is a pure illusion,that you like it only because your nervous system is irrationally conditioned to like it. You may still, in the lowest sense, have a "good time"; but just in so far as it becomes very good, just in so far as it ever threatens to push you on from cold sensuality into real warmth and enthusiasm and joy, so far you will be forced to feel the hopeless disharmony between the universe in which you really live [and the universe in which you think you live].

So either there is a God, or love and beauty and meaning are a complete illusion (and why would these deep convictions have ever arisen, anyway?)

"But just because we feel these things are real is no argument that they exist."

But are we only talking about "feelings" here? There is a difference between innate and artificial desires. For example, just because you want a Coke doesn't mean there is a Coke at hand, nor does it mean that one exists anywhere in the world. But thirst is fundamental and innate, and it does mean that there is such a thing as liquid. The desire for Coke came from factors outside of us (advertizing, personal experience), but the thirst desire is completely natural and innate. Artificial desires can exist without a corresponding object. But innate desires correspond always to real objects that can satisfy them, such as with sexual desire (corresponding to sex), physical appetite (corresponding to food), tiredness (corresponding to sleep), relational desires (corresponding to friendship).

Now there exists in us a desire that nothing in time and space can satisfy, a desire for an unknown "something" that no amount of food, sex, friendship, success can satisfy. Human beings everywhere and at all times have been overwhelmingly religious, believing in something beyond the here and now that will fill the desire for that "something". This is an innate desire. Again, Lewis puts it best. "*So, a ducking wants to swim — such a thing as water; a baby wants to suck — such a thing as milk. And if I find in myself a longing which this world cannot meet, then it probably means that I was made for another world as well.*"

Conclusion

The non-theist says: "well, though there is no God, we just know that this is the one innate, deep, normal desire that has no object." That means — that though Christian world view DOES lead us to expect what we see, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we know (that the vast majority of people sense that there is another world) — why not change the premise?

Acts
Before the Sanhedrin

Study 23 | Acts 22:30 - 21:11

INTRODUCTION

We continue to read of the (literal) trials of Paul. We should keep in mind some of the purposes of Luke in giving these to us in such detail. First, Luke shows us how, despite the tremendous powers arrayed against Paul and the gospel, God preserved both of them for his purposes. By the end of this chapter 23, we will see that Paul is rescued from certain death four times (Acts 21:32-33; 22:23-24; 23:10; 23:23ff.) Second, Luke is showing us how the gospel continued to spread into wider and higher circles throughout the Roman empire.

1. **22:30-23:1 – Paul is facing death at any minute. What do we see here is one of the secrets of his boldness? How does I Cor.4:1-4 help us understand what a "good conscience" is?**

What is the secret of his boldness?

Paul says that *"I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience"* (23:1). This is an important theme for Paul — see how he appeals to it again in Acts 24:16 and II Timothy 1:3. Here we see that the secret of confidence before human beings is confidence before God. He has not been as concerned to please people as to please God and fulfill his obligations to the Lord. As a result, there is a boldness. As Paul says elsewhere — *"if God is for us, who can be against us?"* (Rom.8:31)

How does I Cor.4:1-4 help us understand a "clear conscience"?

I Corinthians 4:1-4 is clearly an elaboration of Paul's assertion before the Sanhedrin. There he compares and contrasts three different sources of "validation". First he says that he does not seek validation and affirmation from others: *"I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court"* (I Cor.4:3). Put more bluntly — "I don't care what you think of me, or what anyone thinks of me." This language is often used by modern people, though it was very rare in traditional cultures (where duties to family, tribe, and caste were all-important). However, in our modern culture, we usually turn to a self-validation. We tend to say, "it doesn't matter what others think of my behavior; what really matters is what I think of my behavior." But Paul rejects that source of confidence and accreditation as well. In a startling turn, he says: *"I care very little if I am judged of you… indeed I do not even judge myself."* (I Cor.4:3) He is saying, "I don't care what you think of me — and I don't care what I think of me." Then in v.4 he makes an excellent argument for why this shoud be so. *"My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent".* Think of how many wicked people have done wicked things with a very clear conscience. Are Mafia hit men wracked with guilt? Was Hitler wracked with guilt? No — their consciences were clear, but that did not make them innocent. So Paul shows

here how "dysfunctional" it is to get one's confidence and validation from either other people or one's own feelings. Finally, he turns to the only workable and right source of confidence — *"It is the Lord who judges me"* (v.4).

It is very important to read Acts 23:1 in light of I Cor.4:4. Some might get the impression that Paul is saying in Acts that the main secret of Paul's boldness is simply the "good conscience", but I Cor.4:3-5 shows that the secret is really the good conscience before God. I Cor.4 is a warning against simply going on one's personal feelings of guilt or innocence rather than by what God says in his Word and in the gospel. Clearly "the Lord's judgement" must be something that can contradict one's feelings of innocence. Therefore, Paul is saying that he bases his "self-image" and his "self-evaluation" on neither the human opinion nor self-opinion, but on God's opinion.

2. 23:1. How can we have a good conscience when we know we are sinners? How can Paul (in Acts 23 and I Cor 4:3-5) give us guidance for having the same kind of confidence that he had?

It is important to imagine what Paul means when he says, *"the Lord judges me"?* He probably is looking at all the ways in which we can know God's and opinion of us. That would entail at least three things.

a) We have the duties God gives all of us as Christians in his word that we must do to please him (cf. Galatians 5:13-14 *"you are called to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature… the entire law is summed up by a single command: 'love your neighbor as yourself'"*) So first, we must know that we have made a sincere and concerted effort to please God by obeying his will in the Bible. This does not mean that we are sinless, but that there are no blatant contradictions between how we live in the world our Christian profession (cf.I Peter 3:16). b) Second, we are given spiritual gifts and opportunities to reach out and minister to other people, and we all must seek to be use the gifts and opportunities. When Paul says to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:26-27 that he *"is innocent of the blood of all men"* because he has not hesitated to *"proclaim… the whole will of God"* he is making this reference. Because he has not been afraid to use his gifts to minister to others, he has a clear conscience.

c) Third, however, Paul teaches us that we are free in Christ from any condemnation (Rom.8:1) and are righteous in his sight (Col.1:22). This must be put alongside of the real obligation we have in a) and b) namely, an obligation to please and serve the one who saved us. Yet our consciences will never have any peace if we don't remember that our obligation is to the One who already has completely pardoned and welcomed us. If we are disoriented about the nature of our free-grace-salvation, we will be trying to earn our standing with God through all our obedience (a) and ministry (b). But in Hebrews 9:9 we are reminded that all the gifts and sacrifices that were offered in the tabernacle

"were not able to clear the consciences of the worshipper". What can then cleanse our consciences even though we are sinners? *"How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"* (Heb.9:14).

If he didn't believe the gospel, Paul's statement that "only the Lord judges me" would be totally terrifying! But because of the gospel, Paul can turn to God's assessment of him, rather than to his own feelings or to the opinions of others. And as long as we are a) obeying the will of God and b) serving with our gifts enough to evidence that we are really his — then our consciences stay clear, not because we are being perfect, but because our behavior confirms that we are his adopted children, pardoned and loved.

Let's take inventory! In order to have a clear conscience:

a) You must not be living in contradiction to what you know is God's will. Of course we disobey God, but are you living in a pattern of disobedience in any area(s)?

b) You must be using your gifts and opportunities to serve him. Are you willing to be identified as a Christian to those around you? Are you giving time to ministry that fits your temperment and gifts?

c) You must know that a) and b) cannot ever make you right with God, but can only provide evidence that you are really an adopted child, saved by grace, and now completely accepted by God. Do you understand this?

3. 23:1-5. Commentators are divided over: a) why Ananias had Paul struck and b) how Paul could have failed to recognize the High Priest. What do you think? Was Paul's anger wrong? How does Paul's own statement in Eph.4:26-27 shed light on this issue? How does Paul get self-control? Where do you need to practice these insights?

Why was he struck? Why did he not recognize Ananias?

Ananias the High Priest was an enormously arrogant and power-hungry man, and he may simply have been outraged by Paul's calmness and lack of intimidation and fear in his presence. For evidence F.F. Bruce says, *"Ananias… was one of the most disgraceful profaners of the sacred office. Josephus [the ancient Jewish historian] tells how he seized for himself the tithes that ought to have gone to the common priests; his rapacity and greed became a by-word… he made free use of violence and assasination to further his interests… His pro-Roman party, however, made him an object of intense hostility… when the war against Rome broke out in 66 A.D., he was dragged by the insurgents from an aqueduct in which he had tried to hide, and put to death… "* (p.449-450). John Stott thinks that Ananias understood Paul's words as a claim that, though now

a Christina, he was still a good Jew. *"This seemed to Ananias the height of arrogance, even blasphemy."* (p.351-352).

Paul's assertion that he did not recognize the High Priest is hard to figure out. There are three theories put forward. First, since this was not an official meeting of the Sanhedrin (but rather was a "consultation" called by Roman commander (22:30), Ananias would not have been seated in a prominent position. All Paul would have known was that some voice somewhere in the room had said, "Strike him!" A second theory (John Stott's) is that Paul had bad eyesight due to some physical ailment, and simply did not see it was the High Priest. A third theory is that Paul meant simply, "I spoke before I reflected — before I realized the seriousness of my action". In this latter view, Paul is admitting that he reacted before he could *"realize"* what he was actually doing. The first two theories, or a combination of them, seems most likely.

Was Paul's anger wrong?

This is a matter of opinion. There is no reason why Luke could not show us Paul sinning. After all, the Bible shows us Abraham, Moses, David, Peter–all sinning badly. But I don't think that Paul's anger is unjustified. First, it was illegal to strike and punish a man who has not even been convicted of a charge. The rights of defendents were safe-guarded by both Jewish and Roman law. This was a complete disregard of them both. Second, Paul's characterization of the offender as a *"white-washed wall"* (v.3) is very fair. The metaphor refers to a wall which was rotten and ready to fall but which had its condition hidden by a coat of whitewash. If (as most think) Paul really did not realize that it was the High Priest who gave the order, he was thinking that some religious leader had done it. Whoever it was, that was a person who on the outside was "white-washed" (appearing religious and holy) but who internally was proud and cruel. Perhap we may decide that Paul's expression of this anger was too harsh, (and then again, perhaps we can't), but we probably should not say that his anger was unjustified and wrong.

Ephesians 4:26-27

Paul's says here (NIV) *"In your anger, do not sin"*. That is significant, for he does not say, "don't be angry"! Some translations put it: *"be angry, but sin not"*. It is sometimes felt by Christians that anger itself is sinful. That cannot be, because God is angry all the time (Romans 1:18ff) and because Jesus got angry with Pharisees and with money changers in the temple, and so on. Anger is by nature an offensive defense. Anger is energy that arises toward a threat against something you feel is an great good. Anger is not only appropriate but right — if something valuable and good is being threatened or trampled upon.

So some distinctions can be made: a) Anger is sinful if it is released in defense of the wrong things — such as one's ego, one's selfish interests and needs. (For example, often our anger is just defense of our "face".) b) Anger may be righteous but expressed sinfully if it is aroused by a real good, but released in a way that is very destructive. It is destructive if it is released against the person's body, reputation, heart, etc., rather than against the evil or sin that is

hurting both the perpetrator and others. c) Anger may be both righteously aroused and constructively expressed. This doesn't mean that angry statements cannot be pointed and loud.

How does Paul get self-control?

Paul either visually or cognitively did not grasp that the perpetrator was the High Priest. Paul immediately gets control and admits that his words were disrespectful. He quotes Exodus 22:28, which forbids talking about the leaders of Israel in a disdainful tone. What is remarkable is Paul's mastery of the Scripture. In such a highly-charged situation, he knows the Scripture so well that relevant texts jump to mind! This is how he gets control. He uses the Word of God on himself.

> "What impresses us about Paul is the instantaneous submission to the law of God, once he was made aware that the speaker who so unlawfully ordered him to be struck was the high priest With all the pressures flooding in upon him — the threats of the mob to lynch him, the feeling that he could not get a fair trial, the injustice of the command to hit him — Paul had the presence of mind to recall the Exodus command… [As Jesus said], 'My sheep hear my voice'. As soon as Paul heard the voice, every faculty was called into obedience…"
>
> – John Sanderson, *The Fruit of the Spirit*, p.124

Paul was able to use Scripture to "hear his Master's voice".

4. 23:6-10. What was Paul's tactic in this hearing? Did it work? Was Paul more concerned with his own welfare or more concerned for the truth?

Paul knew that the Sanhedrin was divided between conservative Pharisees and the liberal Sadducees. Paul now announces that was a Pharisee by training and belief, and that he stood for the resurrection of the dead (which the Pharisees accepted and the Sadduceess did not. This immediately set the two parties at such odds with each other that the Roman commander had to end the meeting with a detachment of troops! Once again, the inquiry is abandoned; no charges are brought or made to stick. The tactic was brilliant in this regard.

But was Paul simply being cagey and practical? Some commentators have felt that Paul was being deceptive by calling himself a Pharisee when he really was not. He was simply playing this card for effect. That is unfair, however. The Pharisees were supernaturalists, who believed in miracles, the soul, in the resurrection, in the absolute necessity of the fulfillment of the whole moral law, in the infallibility of the Scripture, and in the coming of a Messiah. In all of these things Paul was most definitely still a Pharisee — indeed, he would say that he was more truly a Pharisee than all the others, because through Christ the entire law was completely fulfilled. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Scripture, the Messiah, and is the one who brings us to the resurrection. The Sadducees

denied every one of these things, and therefore their theology was farther from Christianity. *"A Sadducee could not become a Christian without abandoning the distinctive theological position of his party; a Pharisee could become a Christian and remain a Pharisee — in the early decades of Christianity at least. It was not until 90 A.D. or thereby that steps were taken to exclude Jewish Christians from participation in synagogue worship."* (Bruce, p.453).

So Paul's statement was not only savvy, it was a witness for the truth. Paul was genuinely concerned with true doctrine, and the anti-supernaturalist stance of the Sadducees was inimical to the gospel.

5. 23:11. How does the Lord encourage Paul? How does he encourage you during hard times?

The last time Christ spoke to Paul this directly was in 18:9-10. Then Jesus assured Paul that he would not be attacked or harmed. But this time there is no such assurance! Rather, there is only an assurance that Paul would live until getting to Rome, and that God would work through all the injustice and danger and difficulty to make Paul a greater witness for him. This promise surely helped Paul be patient and confident in all that happened over the next years.

Actually, the Lord encourages us in the same way, thought not through supernatural revelations. First, we also have Jesus' word in the Scripture. Second, this word also has in it promises — not for exemption from harm, but for spiritual growth for us and the furtherance of God's good purposes (cf. Gen.50:20; Rom.8:28).

WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY

Part 1 – Trusting the Bible

Why should we trust the Bible in general? Because Jesus taught and believed in the Bible's trustworthiness (John 5:37-39, 46-47; 10:34; Matthew 5:17,19; 19:4-5). But how can we know what Jesus did and taught? Because the four gospels in the New Testament can be trusted as reliable history.

"But we don't even have the original manuscripts — we only have copies of copies. Who knows how reliable they are?"

No scholars doubt that what we have today is essentially the same Gospels as originally written. The earliest copies we have of other documents of antiquity are usually 500-1000 years newer than the originals. (For example, the oldest copy of Caesar's *Gallic Wars* [c.50 B.C.] is from 850 A.D. Yet no historian doubts that we can trust it.) Yet we have thousands of copies of the Bible, some within a few decades of its composition.

"But weren't the gospels really legends written long after the events, so that we cannot be sure that they reflect accurate first person memory?"

In the 19th century, many scholars insisted that the Bible was written over 100 years after the event, but archaeology and scholarship has forced the consensus that all the Gospels were written 65-95 A.D., or 30-60 years after the life of Jesus. (And St.Paul's letters, which contain much information about Jesus, were written just two decades after his death.) Thus all the essential historical claims of the New Testament (that Jesus did miracles such as the raising of Lazarus, that he claimed to be God, that dozens of people saw him risen from the dead) were circulating within the lifetime of thousands of people who had lived in Judea and had witnessed Jesus' ministry. How could Christianity have flourished when thousands of people (many of them hostile) could have contradicted the message?

Imagine a book coming out that claims that on a a day 45 years ago, in a remote town of 5,000 in Canada, a flying saucer landed in full view of all the town. Certainly someone would go to that town and ask for corroboration. But what if none of the 1,000 residents still alive, who were there on that day, denied any such memory. What if the thousands of residents who were related or who knew the thousands of now deceased residents report that they never had heard anything about it in all those years? Surely, the author of the book could insist that people were lying, or that some miraculous "memory loss" had happened. But the number of believers in the book would be exceedingly small. In the same way, it would have been impossible for Christianity to have gained such widespread support if its critical historical claims were bluntly contradicted by the numerous witnesses who were still alive.

"But still — 30 to 60 years is a long time. How can we be sure memories of Jesus' words and deeds were accurate?"

Some have taught that, after the death of Christ, the early Christians spun out stories of Jesus' words and deeds which quickly changed and evolved in the telling, in a sort of "whisper down the alley" way. But we know that the rules of Jewish oral tradition (which would have governed the teaching of the earliest church) insisted on accurately memorizing massive amounts of material. Jewish disciples of a rabbi would have memorized his teachings word for word and then would have passed on the tradition faithfully and unaltered. The New Testament itself claims that this is what happened (Luke 1:1-4; I Corinthians 15:3-8; Col.2:7), so that when the Gospels were written, the writers could draw not only on eyewitness memories, but on large amounts of Jesus' words and deeds carefully preserved in the churches. One of the evidences of this is how often the Gospels, written in Greek, preserve Aramaic words and word order. (Aramaic was the language of Jesus.)

"But ancient writers were not interested in the difference between fact and legend."

This is simply not the case. While ancient historians were not as critical and precise as modern ones, there was a real effort to ask "did it really happen"? Luke (1:1-4) makes a very specific claim to be preserving historical facts through eyewitness accounts and the painstaking checking of sources. Also, ancient legends and forms of fiction did not contain the kind of detailed descriptions of events that the Gospels do. There are numerous examples of "irrelevant details" (like the 153 fish in John 21:11) which have no reason to be included in the narrative and would not have occurred to the author unless they simply happened. The *"I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know none of them are like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage… pretty close to the facts, nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown [ancient] writer… without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern novelistic, realistic narrative...The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned how to read."* (C.S.Lewis) Therefore, these are either history or very intentional and deliberate fabricated lies, but they are not legends.

"But — no offense — isn't that what religious activists do? Didn't the authors embellish and shape the story of Jesus to bolster their authority and meet the needs of the early church?"

Certainly we must agree that the Gospel writers were not just reporters, but were teachers. They had their perspectives and they selected and organized their material to get their points across. But all the same reasons (stated above)

make it impossible for them to have done outright fabrications: the rules of Jewish oral tradition, the non-fictional literary form, the blunt claims of accuracy, and the continued presence of corroborative eyewitnesses. A.N.Sherwin-White, an Oxford historian, studied the rate at which legend accumulated in the ancient world and wiped out the core of historical fact. It took at least three full generations. The essential claims of Christianity were publically circulating within too short a time for that to happen.

"But aren't the Gospels full of contradictions?"

This is a great misconception. Most of the contradictions between the Gospels are the result of the authors' selective use of data. For example, Luke 24 seems to say that Jesus ascended on the same day that he rose from the dead (thus contradicting the other Gospels). But in Acts 1 (also written by Luke) we see that Luke did know about the 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension. Many other apparent discrepancies are explained similarly. There are a few difficuties that are harder to explain, but we should remember that we are only arguing here that the Gospels are reliable history.

Summary Why are we only arguing for the historical reliability of the Gospels? Because if they are reliable, then we can view the evidence for the claim that Jesus is the Son of God. If we decide that he is that, we will be able to embrace the entire trustworthiness of the Bible, because he taught it. If we do not accept his claims, we are not going to accept the whole Bible (nor will we need to).

Acts

Escape to Felix

Study 24 | Acts 23:11 - 24:21

INTRODUCTION

Luke continues to give us the history of Paul's years of captivity and trials and persecution until his arrival in Rome for his hearing before Caesar. We have mentioned that Luke has at least two purposes for these accounts — one for the outsider/inquirer and one for the insider/believer. For the outsider, these accounts show how Paul and Christianity was continually found "not guilty" by Roman law when charged with being destabilizing or harmful to society. So Luke had a "apologetic" purpose. On the other hand, for the believer, these accounts show how God can overrule and work his will through tribulations and suffering. Paul was the recipient of a great deal of injustice, yet God stayed by him and used him mightily through it all. This account and the account of the shipwreck in Acts 27 are some classic examples of how God masters and controls historical events.

(**Note:** Some of this discussion may raise questions about the relationship of God's sovereignty to human freedom and responsibility. e.g."If everything is fixed and predestined, why put forth any effort?" We will look at this issue in more detail when we get to Acts 27.)

1. **What is the relationship of v.11 to the rest of the chapter? How does it shed light on a) God's actions, and b) Paul's heart and attitude? What does v.11 guarantee, and what does it not guarantee? Do we have anything like the same guarantee or promise that Paul was given?**

<u>How v.11 sheds light on God's activity in the rest of the passage.</u>

a) In 23:11, Jesus appears to Paul and promises him that he will *"testify in Rome"*. It is a pledge by the Lord to keep Paul alive until he gets to Rome, despite all the numerous plots and efforts to have him killed. Therefore, the passage about Paul's escape from the 40 would-be assasins is not a record of a series of fortunate coincidences, but rather it is an account of God's providential control of all the circumstances of history so as to infallibly work out his own purposes. Luke is showing us Jesus' guarantee right before Paul's escape so that we cannot miss the hand of God in all the events. Sum: In 23:12ff, Jesus begins to keep his pledge to Paul. We are allowed to see (as we seldom are) God's specific purpose directing all the "coincidences" and so-called random events of history.

<u>How v.11 sheds light on Paul's heart and attitude.</u>

b) This assurance tells us much about Paul's heart. Notice that Jesus does not assure him that he will escape captivity or suffering or injustice or even death. He is not promised freedom or security or safety — only an effective witness. All he guarantees for Paul is that he will survive until he gets to Rome and there be able to testify to the gospel in public. For most people, such a promise

would be of no comfort, for their greatest longing is for personal peace and comfort. But Paul is being given his highest life goal, and therefore this word from Christ was profoundly encouraging and empowering. One commentator sees v.11 as explaining Paul's attitude, spirit, and conduct throughout all the rest of the book of Acts.

> "This assurance meant much to Paul during the delays and anxieties of the next two years, and goes far to account for the calm and dignified bearing which seemed to mark him out as a master of events rather than their victim".
> – F. F. Bruce, p.455

What a great way to put it! To the uninformed observer, Paul looks like a victim, like a man completely out of control. Yet Paul's spirit and conduct (especially as it will be evidenced in his speeches before his captors) shows a man with a different perspective. He was *"a master of events rather than their victim"*. He was not cringing in a corner. There was a greatness and confidence about him. He knew that no one had any power over him except that which was lent to them by his Lord, for his purposes. (Cf.John 19:11 –*"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."*)

Do *we* have anything like the promise to Paul?

Yes. Paul was given a very specific and remarkable promise, that he would make it alive to Rome, and we have nothing so specific in the Bible, but we have something that covers all the necessary territory anyway. First, we have the assertion in Eph.1:11 that God *"works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will"*. Thus we see that the circumstances of life — every one of them — are being influenced by him so that they follow his plan. But the this bare fact becomes a remarkable assurance in Romans 8:28. There we are told that God *"works"* (controls, directs) *"in all things"* (every single circumstance and event) *"for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose"* (Romans 8:28). This is a guarantee that God's plan is for our good, and nothing can thwart it.

This profound and comprehensive promise should have the same effect on us as the Acts 23:11 promise had on Paul. We do not have as concrete an assurance as "you will live another two years at least", but we do know that we will get what we would have asked for if we knew all he knows. So Romans 8:28 really comes down to being the same thing that Paul had.

We have a case study of this promise's application in Genesis 50:20, where Joseph says to his brothers, who had sold him into slavery, *"you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good"*. Joseph was able to forgive his brothers and was able to face life with this form of the same basic assurance. John Newton put it this way:

> "Everything is necessary that he sends; nothing can be necessary that he withholds." (Letters of John Newton Banner of Truth, p. 179)

Therefore, we have the same basic resource that Paul did, and we have the capability to face even terrible danger and disasters with the confidence and peace that Paul did.

2. 23:12-35. John Stott writes: "the most… cunning of human plans cannot succeed if God opposes them." a) How does this passage show this? (Trace the "coincidences".) b) How has your experience shown this? How does Claudius Lysias twist the truth to look good? Do you ever do this?

How does this passage show this?

There is a whole chain of interactions and decisions that had to be made for Paul to escape — if any one of them had failed, he would have been killed.

a) First, the plotters had to miscalculate.

Why would the informants let Paul's nephew know of the plan to assasinate his uncle? Commentators point out that it would have been very unlikely that the makers of such a solemn oath and of such a dangerous act of civil disobedience would have just let word of this out in a general way. Therefore, there are two possible reasons why informants spoke to Paul's nephew. a) They might have been unaware of his relationship with Paul. This is not that likely, but if it was the case, we see the hand of God in this first "coincidence". b) But it is also possible, and more likely, that the informants did not think that Paul's nephew would be opposed to plan.

"When Paul says in Phil.3:8 that for Christ's sake he has 'suffered the loss of all things', it is usually inferred (and very reasonably so) that he was disinherited for his acceptance and proclamation of Jesus as Messiah. His father [would have had to be] a provincial Roman citizen, would certainly be a wealthy man. But it appears that the mother of this young man retained some sisterly affection for her brother, and[/or maybe] something of that affection was passed on to her son… Whoever the young man's informants were… it may have been common knowledge that Paul's bitterest opponents were the members of his own family." (p.458) This is an intriguing theory and very, very possible. Why would the nephew have been let in on the secret unless it was generally known that his family was against him?

b) Second, Paul's nephew had to have courage and love.

Evidently, Paul's nephew did care for his uncle, and he showed a great deal of courage to come and inform on the assasins. The commander's word to him to not *"tell anyone that you have reported this to me"* (v.22) shows how explosive the situation was. After all, the 40 assasins were virtually on a suicide mission — they were in a murderous, fanatical state of mind. The nephew had to risk his life to do what he did. He could have easily "chickened out", but God's hand was on his heart.

Though we cannot know more about Paul's family relationships, it appears that God had kept either his sister or at least his nephew close to the evangelist even when much of the rest of his family was probably alienated. We see that this was not just a random circumstance of history. If God had not appointed it, if the nephew had been an enemy, Paul would have been killed.

c) Third, the commander had to make a wise choice.

The commander, Claudius Lysias, by his somewhat disingenuous letter (see below) showed that he was not a paragon of virtue. Surely it was a great deal of trouble and bother to send out such a large entourage of soldiers and cavalry just to save one prisoner. But we see that a) Claudius Lysias was a man with a basic sense of justice (cf. v.29 *"there was no charge against him that deserved death and imprisonment"*). And in addition, b) he probably felt that it was time to simply be rid of the potential political trouble that Paul would continue to bring him. After all — what would be next? An outright assault on the barracks? *"[The commander] could not afford to incur responsibility for the assasination of a Roman citizen, or to expose himself to any of the other risks that he must inevitably run so long as he had Paul in his custody"* (Bruce, p.458). So a combination of self-interest and a sense of justice combined to lead the commander to save Paul's life. It is hard not to contrast Claudius Lysias with Pilate. Pilate too felt that his prisoner was not worthy of death, but he gave in to the angry populace. But here God was directing the one in power to protect the innocent man. Summary: a string of coincidences, mistakes, choices and decsions all "worked together" to free Paul and take him toward Rome. God was in it all.

How has your own experience shown this? Is there any incident (probably less dramatic!) where a series of apparent coincidences were used by God to protect you from some danger?

How did Claudius Lysias twist the truth to look good? Do you do this?
Claudius Lysias shows his self-interest in v.27 where he twists the facts, conveniently omitting the fact that he did not learn Paul was a Roman citizen until he was about to be scourged. The commander says that he rescued Paul because he knew that he was a Roman citizen. That's simply a lie to make himself look good.

3. 24:1-9. Make a list of the charges brought against Paul before Felix? What evidence is mustered for each charge?

There were three basic charges against Paul lodged by the priests and elders through a lawyer named Tertullus.

First, they accused him of being a *"troublemaker"* (v.5) who *"stirs up riots among Jews all over the world"*. This is a reference to something that was very close to a fact. There had been numerous argumentsl, conflicts, and even some

rioting at many cities were Paul ministered. But the implication had *"serious… political overtones. There were many Jewish agitators at that time, Messianic pretenders who threatened the very 'peace' that Tertullus had attributed to Felix (v.2)".* (Stott, p.360) This charge was so serious that Luke himself is probably trying to refute it in this very book of Acts. He shows that the rioting and the agitation was all the responsibility of Paul's opponants, it was not the purpose of Paul's ministry. Luke's account in Acts shows that competent and impartial judges repeatedly confirmed that the Christian movement was not undermining the peace of society or the law of Rome.

Second, they accused him of being *"a leader of the Nazarene sect"* (v.5b). The word "sect" in this usage seems to be an effort to distance Christianity from Judaism. Judaism was recognized and accepted as a protected religion under Roman law. Christians had enjoyed this same protection because they also preached the God of the Bible, and in the Roman eyes, the differences between Christians and Jews were minor. Tertullus is trying here to identify Christianity as a new, unrecognized, and dangerous religion.

The third charge was the most specific. They accused him of trying *"to desecrate the temple"* (v.5c). This is reference to the belief that he had brought Troophimus, a Gentile, into the temple courts, in clear violation not only of Jewish law, but of Roman law which allowed the Jews power to punish offenses against their temple laws. This is again very serious, because if it was true, Felix was obliged to hand Paul over to the Jewish leaders' jurisdiction.

The basic gist of the accusations here and in all these trials is this: a) They charge him with acting contrary to Moses (of being unfaithful to the Scriptures and the faith of his people), and b) they charge him with acting contrary to Caesare (of being a disturber of the peace and of undermining society).

The evidence, however, is incredibly weak. The accompanying elders joined in the accusation (v.9) but Tertullus can only urge Felix to cross-examine Paul to find out the truth of these things. This means that Tertullus is pinning his case on the hope that Paul, given enough rope, will say something to hang himself. Perhaps Tertullus and company was so self-deceived that they thought Paul would admit some of these things.

4. 24:10-21. How does Paul defend himself against the accusations?

In vv.11-13 and vv.17-19 Paul takes on the first and third charge that he has disturbed the peace in general and broken the temple law in particular. *"My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone… or stirring up a crowd in the synagogue or anywhere else in the city."* (v.12). In other words, the rioting and disturbance was caused completely by his opponents and attackers. He continually points out that the accusations are unsubstantiated and can easily be refuted by recourse to eyewitnesses (such as Claudius Lysias) about the incident at the temple. Then in vv.17-19 cannily challenges them to explain why

they could not even make a charge stick in front of the Sanhedrin. Here he refers to his hearing before the Jewish court in early chapter 23. This is a great move. Paul is pointing out that he has already appeared before the highest Jewish court of appeal, and they failed to find him guilty of any of these things. So, in summary, if neither Claudius Lysias (i.e. the Romans) nor the Sanhedrin (i.e. the Jews) could find fault with him, why should there be any question now?

The remaining objection is that Paul is the leader of a "sect" and therefore is not being true to the faith of his people. Paul will not admit that Christianity is a "sect" — but only that *"they call [it] a sect"* (v.14). Rather, he makes four assertions to claim that he propounding a faith that is continuous with Biblical religion and with the faith of his people. He says a) *I worship the God of our Fathers,* (the God he worships is not a different God but the same God that Moses worshipped), b) "*I believe everything that agrees with the Law and… Prophets"* (he accepts the whole Scriptures), c) *I have the same hope in God* (he clings to the same promises in resurrection and judgment in the Bible that his accusers cling to), d) *I strive [also] to keep my conscience clear.* (v.14-16). He is saying that ultimately he is not an innovator. He worships the same God, abides by the same standards of truth, and hopes in the same salvation as they.

5. Are any of these charges against Paul also thrown at Christians in New York City? How can we answer them?

In a sense, yes. The two basic accusations against Paul were that a) he was not being true to his own people, and b) he was not being a good citizen of the broader society. In secular cities, when people become Christians, very similar objections are raised against them.

First, most converts find that their loyalty or ties to their family and their faith is questioned. Often the new Christian leaves the church he or she was raised in, and this is inexplicable to family who think of Christianity in terms of denominations and institutions rather than in terms of the new birth. A person raised Southern Baptist may become Episcopalian or Catholic, or a person raised Catholic may become Methodist, or a person raised in Judaism may be baptized a Christian. Why does this happen? We don't become Christians until hear the gospel and finally realize that Christianity is a personal relationship to God (as opposed to just doctrinal subscription and behavior). Whatever church we were raised in did not show us that (or, our spiritual eyes were not opened at the time). Whatever venue (church) n which we understand the gospel — that is usually the church we join. But family or friends often will not understand because they may still think of Christianity only n terms of institutional affiliation. Then in the case of people who were raised with no religion or some other religion, there can be real ostracism from their family and people. Parents who raised their child to be an atheist, or to be Jewish or

Buddhist may be highly offended and feel personally rejected by a child's conversion.

How do we answer this? New Christians tend to be judgemental. Because they are still somewhat new to the idea of being "saved by grace", they may quickly fall into a kind of pride and take their new faith and truth and show all their friends and family that they are lost and mistaken. New Christians must realize that, since they are saved by grace, we must respect other people's moral sense and wisdom, and we must remember that only God can open eyes and hearts (remember Lydia).

Second, many people in secular city feel that Christians are intolerant and even dangerous because of their "narrow" moral views. Though it exists in a very different form today, there is still a deep suspision that Christians are bad citizens, that if given a chance they would impose all their moral views on everyone else. Some intemperate Christians have made public statements that lend themselves to this interpretation. The only way for Christians to show that they are good citizens is to first of all be good citizens. We need to be involved in our neighborhoods, we need to be involved in serving the human community, not just the Christian community. But also, as mentioned above, the gospel provides great resources for treating non-believing neighbors with both humility and hope. a) We treat them with humility because the gospel tells us we are saved by grace alone — thus our non-believing neighbors may have moral sense and wisdom that we do not have. We should expect to learn from them. The gospel of grace leads us to look at "unsaved" people witht this kind of respect, while a religion of works would not do so. b) We treat them with hope because the gospel tells us that our salvation is a miracle. We were not saved because we were so wise and rational and spiritually open. Therefore we can have hope for anyone — even the most closed and seemingly alienated from Christ. So if we treat all around us with respect and hope, and if we involve ourselves in the human community, not just the Christian community — then we will turn away the charge that Christians are not good citizens.

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

The following is part of a series of sheets to give and discuss with friends who don't believe the Christian faith. This particular set of sheets is the most difficult. With many people, it would be good to skip some or all of them. But they will be absolutely necessary with a number of people, especially those who have thought through their objections to Christianity in a coherent way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**

4. **Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?**

WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY

Part 2 – The possibility of miracles

Before we can assess the evidence for Jesus' claims and identity we must first be in the position of admitting at least the possibility of miracles. But this is something that a great number of contemporary people cannot do. Broadly speaking, there are three basic reasons for rejecting the possibility of miracles.

"We cannot believe in miracles in a modern, technological age."
This view was put forth in a famous statement by Rudolph Bultmann in the 1950's, when he wrote, "it is impossible to use electrical lights and the radio and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles". But this is not an argument, it is really only just an emotional assertion — "*I* feel when I use technology that miracles don't exist". But why should a new invention lead us to disbelieve in God? Why didn't we stop believing in God when the wheel was invented (a much more revolutionary technological advance than electricity or even the microprocessor). Some people feel skeptical or miracles and many others feel the opposite. Such psychological and sociological facts do not provide evidence either way.

"Modern science makes it impossible to believe in miracles."
"We now know", this view goes, "that there are Laws of Nature which cannot be violated". But first, fewer and fewer scientists are willing to talk about "laws" of nature. Physical science has had a revolution lately in which the assumed invoilability of Newtonian mechanics has given way to quantum theory, in which physical 'laws' are now only seen as regularities of nature. "Laws" are really only descriptions of how entities usually behave. Experience can only tell us that a "law" or custom of nature has not been violated, but empirical observation could never prove that it never can be.

Secondly, while nature has regularities, they can be altered by the actions of personal agents. For example, a baseball ought to fall to the ground when I let it go (because the the "law of gravity"), but it will not if another person catches it and holds it up. Now if personal agents can regularly bring about new events that would not have occurred by natural forces alone, how much more, if God exists, could he do so? If God exists, the laws of nature are not rules to which he must submit, but are just customary ways in which he upholds the world. If he wills something unusual on a particular occasion, then a "miracle" occurs, but there is nothing analogous to a human being breaking through a barrier or violating a law.

"But I don't know that there is a God, and therefore I cannot assume that miracles are possible."

But this statement is not really reasonable. Not knowing that there is a God is not the same as *knowing there is no God.* And you would have to absolutely know that there is no God in order to say "miracles are impossible". Unless you could prove that there is no personal God who can alter nature's regularities, then you cannot assume that miracles are impossible. Since (as we tried to show in previous places) no one can prove that God cannot exist, therefore no one can insist on the impossibility of miracles. Therefore, we must be at least open to historical accounts, like the Gospels, which attest to miracles like the resurrection of Christ.

Sum: Miracles are impossible only if you assume (take on faith) that there is no personal supernatural God. To say, "miracles are impossible" is thus a statement of faith, not something that anyone can prove. It is to say, "miracles cannot happen because miracles just cannot happen." Therefore, many efforts to explain away Biblical miracles require greater "leaps of faith" than to accept them.

> "When the Old Testament says that Sennacherib's invasion was stopped by angels (II Kings 19:35), and Herodotus says it was stopped by a lot of mice who came and ate up all the bowstrings of the whole army (Herodotus, Bk.II, Sect.141), an open-minded person will be on the side of the angels. Unless you start by beggin the question [assuming miracles cannot happen] there is nothing intrinsically unlikely in the existence of angels or in the action described to them. But mice just don't do these things."
>
> – C.S. Lewis

Before Felix and Festus

Study 25 | Acts 24:22 - 25:22

INTRODUCTION

It will be important to know some background information about the prominent persons before whom Paul testified. ***Antonius Felix,*** procurator (imperial governor) of Judea from AD 52 to 59, was a commoner, not an "equestrian" — the noble class from which nearly all high Roman officials and came. His unprecedented rise from humble social origins to his royal position was owed to the influence of his brother Pallas, who had much influence at the Roman court under Emperor Claudius. During his term of office, several Jewish uprisings occurred and Felix put them down with such extreme ruthlessness that he alienated more moderate Jews which in turn led to worse political unrest. Eventually he was relieved of his duties because of how his heavy-handedness was backfiring so badly.

Felix at the time of his meeting with Paul was married to ***Drusilla,*** the youngest daughter of the Jewish king Herod Agrippa I (whose death is described in Acts 12:19-23). All historical accounts report that she was a ravishing beauty. Originally she was betrothed to the crown prince of Commagene, in Asia Minor, but the marriage did not take place because the the prince would not convert to Judaism. Instead, she married the king of Emesa, a small state in Syria. But according to the Jewish historian Josephus, Felix seduced her with the help of a Cypriot magician, and she left her husband to marry him. At the time of this incident with Paul, she was not yet 20 years old.

Porcius Festus replaced Felix as governor and only served for two years. We know little of him, except that during his term there was little of the brutality that marked the administrations of both his predecessors and successors. It is thus fair to assume that he was a more judicious and fair-minded man than other procurators.

1. **24:22-27. What hints are there that Felix and Drusilla were interested in Paul's message? Why do you think they might have been? (Consider what we know about them from the introduction.) What does that tell us about how and why people show interest in the gospel?**

<u>What hints are there of spiritual interest?/ Why might they have been interested?</u>

Felix's attitude toward Paul was not just politically ambivalent, but also spiritually ambivalent and "conflicted". He was intrigued and interested, not just in Paul's case, but in Paul's message. There are at least two hints with regard to this interest. First, Luke may be hinting that his interest had preceded this meeting with Paul. Verse 22 tells us that he was *"well acquainted with the Way"* (i.e. Christianity). This is fairly suprising remark. Why would a Roman governor be well acquainted with this still very marginal religious phenomenon?

notes

BEFORE FELIX AND FESTUS

When we look at Felix's background we note that he had unusually "common" social roots for a man who attained such a high standing. He had many friends and acquaintances who lived in the social strata where most Christians came from — the working classes and servants. It may be that he had contacts with people who had been converted. It may be that he was intrigued by the gospel because someone he knew was either interested or believing.

The second indication of his spiritual interest was that he came with Drusilla to listen to Paul speak specifically about *"faith in Christ Jesus"* (v.24). They say and listened to it, which is remarkable. (Also, though Luke is very forthright about Felix's bad motives (see v.29a) yet Felix *"sent for him frequently and talked with him"*.) Again, we may look into historical background for some reasons for this. Drusilla may have been in a period of "spiritual sensitivity". She was Jewish, and therefore was steeped in Biblical religion and God's law. (We know that she did not marry one man because he would not convert to Judaism.) Yet she had committed adultery and was now "living in sin". Was her conscience bothering her? Was she therefore searching for God?

What does this tell us about how and why people are interested in the gospel?

We cannot know the reasons for this spiritual interest for sure, but these hints remind us of some important principles about how and why people become open to the gospel. It is true that a brilliant presentation of the gospel can surprise non-believers and give them favorable impressions, but there must be some fundamental "shifts" within a person's heart that create an openness to the gospel. No matter how eloquent or rational the presentation, it will not persuade if the hearer has no sense of need, of personal relevance.

The two most basic ways of sensing personal relevance are indicated by Felix and Drusilla's history. *1) Friends or acquantances that find Christ.* If someone you know and have some respect/affection for is either interested in Christ, or has found Christ, that makes the gospel suddenly much more plausible to you. Even if you don't "get it", your friend's interest lengthens you attention span greatly. You are willing to listen more to the gospel, in case you are missing something. *2) A sense of personal weakness or inadequacy.* If you have disappointed yourself, or if you have become aware of failure or powerlessness in some area of your life, your sense of spiritual need grows. Again, this lengthens your attention span, and you don't give the gospel a hearing. It is the people who a) know no one they respect who is a Christian, or b) feel very competent and equal to the challenges of life — who simply laugh off the gospel.

There are many practical implications. First, as Christians, we should not "push" our arguments or our presentation of the gospel on someone who clearly is not interested. Unless they have a sense of the gospel's "plausibility" and relevance, they won't sit still for much explanation of what the faith is or why it is true. Second, this means that there is no more important witness than to: a) live exemplary lives and b) gently let people know you are a Christian.

The most direct way to open a person is the gospel is to just let them get to know a Christian who they respect. (In New York City--people will most respect Christians who are excellent in their work, who are compassionate in their concern for people in need, who are fair and civil and non-condescending to people with whom they differ.)

2. 24:24-27. What can we tell from this brief description that Paul said to Felix and Drusilla?

First of all, Paul spoke of *"faith in Christ Jesus"*. It is helpful to see how Luke can summarize the gospel message in this way. It shows us that the gospel is a) The centrality of Christ. He did not come just to show us the way, but he came to be the way. He did not just come to tell us what we must do to be saved, but he came to save. b) The necessity of faith. We are not saved by what we do, but by believing in what he has done.

But Luke also tells us that Paul dealt with three topics. There have been two views of what these topics were. The first view thinks that these are the three "tenses" of salvation:

> "the dikaiosune ('righteousness') of which Paul spoke was 'the righteousness of God' or divine act of justification which he had elaborated in his letter to the Romans. In this case, the three topics of conversation were what are sometimes called the three 'tenses' of salvation, namely how to be justified or pronounced righteous by God, how to overcome temptation and gain self-mastery, and how to escape the awful final judgment of God. "
>
> – Stott, p. 364

But a second view thinks that these three topics were an personal application to the lives of Felix and Drusilla. Therefore *"righteousness"* had to do with the lack of justice with which Felix ruled the country, and *"self-control"* had to do how Drusilla had broken her marriage vows, and *"the judgment to come"* had to do with the final penalty if these things were not repented for.

I prefer to follow John Stott's interpretation, since I don't see how a discourse which did nothing but denounce Felix and Drusilla's sins would have a) gotten Felix to say, "I want to hear from you again" (v.25b), nor would have b) been summarized as a discourse on *"faith in Christ Jesus"*. However, I think that it is very clear that a presentation of the gospel, and of salvation in all three tenses, would have necessarily begun to work on their consciences. In other words, there is nothing more convicting than to preach the gospel (rather than the law). To preach about the Son of God who came to die for our sins shows a) how serious sin is, and b) how much we owe it to him to now follow him. No wonder Felix was *"afraid"* (v.25)! If Paul had just preached a moral code, Felix would have been angry, not afraid. Preaching the Law reveals sin by saying: "You must obey God because he will crush you if you don't stop sinning! Obey

him out of fear." Preaching the Gospel reveals sin by saying: "You must obey God because he let his Son be crushed so you could be free from sin. Obey him out of love." The gospel shows us a God more holy than that of traditional religion (since He won't settle for just our imperfect moral efforts) yet a God more loving than that of traditional religion (since He was willing to sacrifice his own Son for us). Thus this kind of God is deeply alarming to the human conscience — more alarming than a God who just thunders out the Law and demands morality. The God of the gospel deserves more service and surrender, because of what he has done for us.

In short, both interpretations of the three topics are essentially correct. By preaching the gospel with great thoroughness, the implications for Felix and Drusilla's life became painfully clear. But it was by preaching salvation by Christ and not by moral works that Paul convicted them so deeply about their immorality.

3. 24:22-27. What were the four factors that contributed to prevent Felix from embracing the gospel? Do the same factors prevent you from doing what is right?

The first factor seems almost trivial — an unwillingness to be "inconvenienced" (v.25c). Felix did not want his examination of Christianity to get in the way of any of his normal life goals or lifestyle. Although this may seen trivial, further reflection will reveal its seriousness. People who don't want their schedules or routines or customary patterns of behavior to be interrupted often refuse to take Christianity seriously. They know that if they were to become Christians, it would not require huge changes — just inconveniences, minor embarassments, small changes. And yet they are unwilling.

The second factor was fear. He was *"afraid"* (v.25b). We looked at some of the reasons above for this fear. But what exactly was he afraid of? Probably, there was a mixture of "right" fear and "wrong" fear. The "right" fear would have perhaps been some pangs of conscience. Paul's eloquent message would have made him afraid that maybe there was a God, and maybe he had displeased him. But if the main fear Felix had was "right", he would have moved toward listening to Paul more — not to send him away. Surely the fear that blocked the way for Felix is simply the fear of the unknown. This is a very general anxiety made up of a jumble of poorly formlated fears — what would happen if I converted? would I lose control? would I have to do many things that would make me a laughing stock? what will happen to my social standing? what will my friends think?

The third factor was politics. *"Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews"* (v.27). Becoming a Christian is an individual decision between the person and God. Yet in many situations, an inquirer feels great political pressure from organized power blocks to avoid Christianity. This goes beyond the normal fear of being

laughed at by friends. Often a person realizes that his or her conversion to Christianity will mean they will be excluded from some important social structure. It may mean the stalling of a career or the loss of access to a whole circle of influence and power. In many countries it means the loss of many civil rights.

The fourth factor was greed. "*He was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe"* (v.26). This was completely illegal, even in that time and place, but it was business as usual for Felix. Here we see Felix under some spiritual conviction, but his self-interest, his relentless attitude of "what's in this for me?" overwhelms any healthy seeking.

These four specific factors probably boil down in to two basic motives--self-interest and self-protection. If we are not willing to make sacrifices (vs. self-interest) and make ourselves vulnerable (vs. self-protection), we will fail like Felix to embrace God's will for us.

4. 25:1-12. How do the charges differ this time? Why did Festus offer Paul a trial in Jerusalem? Why did Paul refuse Festus' offer of a trial in Jerusalem and claim his right to appeal to Caesar?

The charges mentioned (v.7-8) are again regarding the Jewish and civil law, but for the first time Caesar is mentioned. Why?

> "The Jews knew that the Roman governors were unwilling to convict on purely religious charges, and therefore tried to give a political twist to the religious charge" (A.N.Sherwin-White. Roman Society and Roman Law in New Testament Times. p.50)

In other words, the religious leaders now realized that they could never get Paul convicted by a Roman governor on moral/religious grounds. Now they knew that they had to convince the civil authorities that Paul undermined the peace and civic order. Therefore they accused him of causing disturbances that disrupted the *pax Romana,* the peace and harmony in society under Roman rule.

Festus asked Paul if he wanted a trial in Jerusalem before the Sanhedrin. This was within the governor's rights, because he could use anyone, including the Sanhedrin, as his jury or as his judicial council. Festus' offer could not have been well-meant toward Paul. If he was totally ignorant of the hostility of the Jews toward Paul, then he might have been giving Paul a chance to be tried by his own people, on his own "home turf". But surely he could see the real situation, how the Jews wanted nothing more than to get him back. Why was Festus willing to sacrifice Paul to them? It is not hard to understand. He had just begun as governor of Judea, and the Sanhedrin was the highest court of the people he was to rule. It would be very politic to begin his administration by doing something to gain their favor. That politics, and not concern for justice,

was seen by the fact that Festus completely ignored the fact that the Sanhedrin had already tried Paul and failed to find him guilty. (23:30ff; 24:20)

Paul, however, knew his danger. When he realized where Festus was going in his desire to please the Jewish leaders, he realized that his only hope was to completely remove himself from under the governor.

> "If Festus began by making a concession to the Sanhedrin, he might be inclined to make further concessions even more prejudicial to Paul's safety. Felix had been an experienced administrator of Judea when Paul's case was submitted to him, but Festus was a novice, and the Sanhedrin might well exploit his inexperience to Paul's disadvantage. There was one way open to Paul as a Roman citizen to escape from his precarious situation, even if it was a way attended y special risks of its own… appeal to Caesar".
>
> – F .F. Bruce, pp. 477-478

The right of appeal to the emperor was a right that Roman citizens had enjoyed for centuries. It was not merely the right of *"appellatio",* the right to appeal the ruling of a lower court, but it was the right of *"provocatio",* the right to a trial in Rome. No Roman citizen could be forced into a trial by a body outside of Italy.

5. 25:13-22. What do Paul's actions teach us about our relationship to civil authority?

1st, Paul's actions show that we **must respect** civil authority as reflecting God's justice in a limited way. Paul in Romans 13:1ff calls Christians to *"submit to the governing authorities"* because they are *"established by God"* (v.1). The civil magistrate is *"God's servant for good"* (v.4). There have been many religions (and some Christians) who have seen secular governing authority as demonic, and who have said that believers have no responsibility toward them. But that is not seen either in Romans 13 or in Paul's actions here in Acts.

> "[Paul's appeal to Caesar] was not because he had lost confidence in Roman justice, but because he he feared that in Jerusalem Roman justice might be overborne by powerful local influences."
>
> – F. F. Bruce, p. 478

The fact is that Roman justice, impartial and fair, continually exonerated Paul in the book of Acts. Paul's appeal to Rome shows his confidence that, if human justice remains open and fair, it will continue to clear him of false charges.

Behind Paul's confidence in the impartiality of Roman justice is a view of "common grace", that non-Christians are filled with moral sense and wisdom which God has given them (Rom.1:19-20; 2:14-15). He sees civil authorities as being ordained and maintained by God, and given general knowledge of truth and justice, even when those same authorities deny god.

2nd, Paul's actions show that we **don't have to fear even bad magistrates.** God uses even very un-Christian rulers as instruments of his purposes. God calls Cyrus, a pagan king, his "servant" (cf. Isaiah 45:1) and Paul writes in the same way about Caesar (Rom.13:4) who at that time was Nero! But look at what happens in Acts 25. Festus is a conciliatory but weak man who is playing politics. But it is these politics that necessitates the drastic action of appealing to Caesar. Yet it is through Festus that God gets Paul to witness in Rome (as Jesus promised — Acts 23:11). Jesus told Pontius Pilate that he was doing nothing but what God had ordained (John 19:11). So there should be no panicky sense that un-Christian people in power are somehow free from God's control The times and extents of their power is limited.

3rd, Paul's actions show that we must **not just blindly or passively accept** the actions of civil magistrates. Paul is extremely pro-active. He does not just give in, but rather protests injustice vigorously and "goes over the head" of Festus to save himself. In the same way, Christians can only give "qualified" respect to civil authority. We have a higher standard — the moral law of God — by which to judge civil authority. We can and must protest and resist injustice.

For a remarkable parallel passage to Paul, see Jeremiah 27. There, God through Jeremiah tells the Israelite King Zedekiah and his envoys that *"my servant, Nebuchadnezzar"* (v.6), a pagan king, will be in charge of that part of the world (27:1-11). This does not mean, however, that God has forgotten justice, for he also says, *"All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him"* (27:7). As the old saying goes, "the mills of God grind slow, but they grind exceeding fine". It is God's will (v.5) that the Israelites will be in exile in a pagan city for a long time (*"and his son and his grandson"*) yet judgment on this wickedness will be come. Jeremiah's prophecy teaches us a great deal about our attitude toward pagans in power over us. We are to give them calm, qualified respect. a) Respect. Jeremiah sees Nebuchadnezzar as being in charge by God's sovereign will. He calls the nations to respect the power God has given him. b) Calm. Since God is totally in control, the pagan king is "God's servant" — unwitting of course! But believers are not anxious. Even the pagan king's unbelief and violence will play into God's hand. We don't fear. c) Qualified. But since God *is* judge, we know that the pagan king and his city is also under judgment and will be judged if there is no repentance (v.7).

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

The following is part of a series of sheets to give and discuss with friends who don't believe the Christian faith. This particular set of sheets is the most difficult. With many people, it would be good to skip some or all of them. But they will be absolutely necessary with a number of people, especially those who have thought through their objections to Christianity in a coherent way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**

4. **Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?**

WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY

Part 3 – The Resurrection of Jesus Christ
The case for the resurrection of Christ is very strong, as long as we grant the possibility of miracles. If we do that, then three basic lines of evidence converge to convince us that Jesus rose from the dead: 1) the fact of the empty tomb, 2) the testimony of numerous eyewitnesses, 3) the long-term impact on the lives of Jesus' followers. If we try to explain these effects away, we find ourselves making even greater leaps of faith than if we believed in the resurrection itself.

How do we know the tomb was empty at all? (Isn't this just legend)?
We know that the early church was proclaiming the resurrection of Christ very early. We also know that there was great hostility from the leaders of Jerusalem toward the spread of Christianity. Therefore, since the earliest church preached the empty tomb — it must have been empty, or no one would have believed the preaching for a minute.

Here is one more piece of historical evidence. The gospel writers mention that the earliest hostile explanation of the empty tomb was that the disciples had stolen it (Matt.28:13). It is extremely unlikely that, if the gospel writers were fabricating these resurrection stories, they would have made up and provided such a plausible alternative explanation for the empty tomb. The fact that they include the body-snatching claim is very strong evidence that it existed. And if it existed, then there must have been an empty tomb that had to be explained.

But even if the tomb is empty, that does not prove a resurrection.
No, but other considerations make it hard to believe in the three possible non-supernatural explanations for the empty tomb. First is the theory that Jesus did not die on the cross, but revived in the tomb. But this is contradicted by the second line of evidence — the eyewitness sightings. Second is the theory that the disciples stole the body. But this is contradicted by both the second and also the third line of evidence — the changed lives of the believers. Third is the theory that the enemies stole it. This is the weakest of all the theories, since enemies would have had strong reasons to produce the body, if they had it.

Here is one more piece of historical evidence. The account of the folded graveclothes in John 20:5-7 contradicts all the theories. It indicates that the graveclothes of Jesus left behind in the tomb were still wrapped around, as if the body had passed through it. If anyone had stolen the body, why would they leave the grave clothes behind, neatly wrapped and folded? Or if Jesus had revived, how could he have gotten out of the graveclothes without tearing them to pieces? (cf. John 11:44)

How do we know anyone claimed to see Jesus? Aren't these just legends?
We can tell that the eyewitness accounts were not legendary. Why? First, Paul in I Corinthians 15 makes a long list of people who claimed to have seen the risen Christ personally, and notes that *"most of them are still living"* (I Cor.15:6). How could Paul write that "Mary and Peter said they saw the risen Jesus" when Peter and Mary were saying, "no we didn't"? It is extremely difficult to see how Christianity could have spread so rapidly if Paul's amazing assertions were so easily refuted. Scholars have noted that legendary accounts of historical events take at least two generations to accrue, long after the eyewitnesses are gone to act as controls on the narratives.

Second, every gospel states that the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection were women. In those times, women's low social status meant that their testimony was usually not admissible evidence in court. There was no reason for Christian writers to fabricate accounts of women seeing Christ first. The only explanation for the existence of these reports is that they really happened. So we can conclude that there really were many, many people who claimed to have seen the risen Christ personally.

Couldn't the eyewitness accounts been a hallucination, or a conspiracy?
Once we grant that the eyewitness claims really occurred, there are two factors that make it highly unlikely that they would be hallucination or a conspiracy. First, the eyewitnesses accounts are too numerous and the groups of eyewitnesses are too large. Paul alone mentions five appearances, and there are three or four others mentioned by the gospels. Acts 1:3-4 tells us that for forty days he appeared constantly to numerous groups of people. And I Cor.15:6 tells us that at one "sighting", five hundred persons saw him at once. The size of the groups and the number of the sightings make it virtually impossible to conclude that all these people had hallucinations. Either they must have actually seen Christ, or hundreds of people must have been part of an elaborate conspiracy which lasted for decades. Paul suggests to his readers that any of them can go and talk to the five hundred witnesses. This would have been a hoax that lasted for years, and one in which no conspirators ever broke down and told the truth.

But the final difficulty with the conspiracy theory is how hard it is to square it with the subsequent lives of the apostles and earliest disciples. Scholars recognize now that first century Jewish people did not believe in an individual resurrrection, but only in a general resurrection at the end of time. But despite the fact that their belief system provided no basis for it — they began to proclaim the resurrection of Christ. And despite the fact that they were poor and small and marginal, they developed a confidence and joy that enabled them to spread the gospel so powerfully that it transformed the whole Roman world. Most impressive of all is the historical fact that nearly all the early apostle's died as martyrs. As Pascal put it, *"I [believe] those witnesses that get their throats cut"*. It is hard to believe that this kind of powerful self-sacrifice could be done for a hoax.

notes

Summary

It is impossible for Christianity to have begun unless the tomb was empty. We know that there were hundreds and hundreds of eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen Jesus dozens of time. There were too many sightings for them to be hallucinations. Yet the transformed, sacrificial lives of the early disciples surely indicates that the beliefs were sincere. Therefore, it is most reasonable to conclude that the disciples saw what they said they saw.

Acts
Before Agrippa (Part I)

Study 26 | Acts 25:13 - 26:23

INTRODUCTION

Herod Agrippa II had become king at age 17 when his father died (cf.Acts 12:21-23). He technically only ruled a fairly small kingdom (between Lebanon and Antilebanon), while the imperial governor had the actual power over Judea. Yet Agrippa was the symbolic head of the Jewish nation, and the Emperor Claudius had given him the administration over the temple and the power to appoint the High Priest. At the time of this event, Agrippa and his sister ***Bernice*** have come to pay respects to the new governor.

1. 25:13-27. How is Festus' summary of the case (v18-20; 24-27) a mixture of truth and untruth?

a) Truth. (1) The Jewish leaders had sought his death (v.24), and (2) Festus had not found him guilty of any capital offense (v.25a), and (3) Paul had made his appeal to the Emperor (v.25b). b) Untruth. *"I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him."* (v.26a). We saw that in 25:5-8 and 26:8 there were very definite and specific charges. One of the charges was difficult for a Gentile to assess — the charge of being unfaithful to *"the law of the Jews"* (25:8), leading a *"sect"* (24:5). But the other two were quite concrete and non-theological, namely that Paul brought a Gentile to the temple, and that he had created civil disturbances (24:5-6; 25:8). But both times Festus describes the charges to Agrippa (26:18-20; and v.26-27), he speaks as if the whole substance is a theological dispute that he could not understand. *("I was at a loss as to how to investigate such matters v.20).*

2. 25:13-27. How does his "spin" reveal how Paul is a problem for Festus? Why is Agrippa a help for him?

How does this reveal how Paul is a problem for Festus?

Festus has two problems, one obvious and one less obvious. The obvious problem is the one he mentions — he does not know how to discern *"such matters"* (v.20). He seems to realize that the Jewish leaders have lodged the civil charges as mere excuses to get at Paul for what they considered his real transgression — the preaching of Jesus. Festus rightly discerns that the theological issue is the real issue, and his curiosity is greatly aroused by this, yet he knows he is completely out of his depth in this whole area. He does not even know what the points of conflict are, and what the merits and weaknesses are of each position.

The less obvious problem is indicated by the fact that Festus needs to send along to Rome some statement of charges (v.27). The civil charges before the governor (of violating temple rules and creating riots) simply were not

substantiated at all by Paul's accusers. There was no evidence that Paul had defiled the temple or had instigated riots. When charges come without any evidence at all, a judge is supposed to dismiss the charges and clear the defendant — not pass the case on, to have it go to trial. The reason Paul appealed his case to Rome was because Festus had not had the courage to declare Paul innocent and let him go. Festus had afraid to alienate the Jewish leaders, and sending Paul to Rome was a convenient way "out" for him. But now he had to explain why he thought the charges against Paul had enough merit that he could not dismiss them. But, of course, this leaves him completely at a loss.

Why is Agrippa a help for Herod?

Agrippa II *"had a reputation of being an authority on the Jewish religion [see 26:3], and Festus decided that he was the man who could best help him to frame the report which he had to remit to Rome in connection with Paul's appeal…"* (F.F.Bruce, p.482) Festus hoped that Agrippa could listen to Paul and help him discover what about Paul was so disruptive of the peace. Probably, Festus hoped that Agrippa could provide some insights about why this case warranted a trial. Festus may have reasoned, "this man must be doing something terribly bad or wrong to provoke such furious opposition". He hoped Agrippa could show him what it was.

3. **25:23-27. Why is this such a tremendous opportunity to proclaim the gospel. Consider how many things God had to work together for this to occur. Refer to the last few chapters.**

Why is this such a tremendous opportunity for the gospel?

First, this is a very strategic opportunity for the gospel because *"the chief captains and the principal men of the city"* were assembled to hear Paul (v.23). Why? It was an social and political occasion — it was a way for the elite of the imperial capital to maintain cordial relations with the head of the nation. This is why there was *"great pomp".* But what an opening for the gospel! Here is Caeserea, the royal capital in the part of the world, and all the leaders of the city are assembled to hear Paul's testimony and message. Imagine any major city in the U.S. or the world having all the leading buisness and political leaders assembling to hear a preacher of the gospel. It hasn't happened (if it has ever happened) in centuries.

The strategic nature of the moment is better appreciated when we remember that up until this point the spread of Christianity had been mainly among the working class and the poor. In a highly class-stratified society, it was very difficult for the lower classes to share their faith with people of the upper classes. Thus an opportunity like this is worth its weight in gold.

Second, this is a very dramatic opportunity for the gospel, because here we see a face to face confrontation with the leaders of two completely opposed spiritual "kingdoms". The Herods were the powerful royal family who, though professing the Biblical faith, had lived lives of violence and corruption for generations, mimicking the ways of the ruling classes of the world. Herod the Great had slaughtered many in an effort to kill Jesus. His son Herod Antipas had executed John the Baptist, his grandson Herod Agrippa I had killed the apostle James. Now Paul has the opportunity to clearly present the gospel which this family had been opposing for generations. The confrontation could not be more dramatic.

Consider how many things God had to "work together" to create this opportunity.

This opportunity for witness — to Felix, Festus, Agrippa, and later to the imperial court itself — was the result of a complex, inter-related series of events that have been chronicles since chapter 21. They include at least these:

a) Paul sought to appease Jewish Christians by doing rites of purification (21:26). If he hadn't agreed to this, he would not have gone publicly to the temple.

b) Some Jews from Asia who recognized Paul "happened" to be in the temple the day Paul went and they began the riot (21:27ff).

c) The news of the riot "happened" to reach the Roman garrison just in the nick of time to save Paul's life (21:31-32).

d) The news of an assasination plot "happened" to reach the ears of Paul's nephew, saving him from death (23:16). Yet if it were not for the assasination plot, Paul would never have been taken to the royal capital. Claudius Lysias would probably have found Paul innocent of the charges and let him escape.

e) The Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, was a fair and just man who thought it worth great effort to save Paul and get him a fair trial (23:23ff), and so he sent him to Caesarea.

f) Felix was unscrupulous and unjust and simply left Paul languishing in captivity for two years (24:27).

g) Festus found himself in a political bind over Paul — caught between political pressure from the Jews and rules of Roman justice

h) Agrippa just "happened" to come to the capital for a visit (25:13).

It is remarkable. If Claudius Lysias had been unjust, and Felix just, none of this would have happened. It was by a very intricate web of interconnected events that Paul is now in a position to proclaim the gospel in a series of "socially lofty" arenas that the Christian faith had barely touched.

4. 25:23-27. How many of these factors were "bad" things? How can this illustration of Romans 8:28 help you right now?

How many of these were "bad"?

Clearly, most of the things that happened in this chain of events were very bad.

(1) First, many of the events that turned out for such good were "bad" in the sense that they were the result of evil deeds. The hostile tourists from Asia, the assassins, the corruption of Felix, and the cowardice of Festus all were used by God to further his purposes. (As did God use the "wickedness" of those who betrayed and killed Jesus, cf. Acts 2:23).

(2) Second, many of the events were "bad" in the sense that they were extremely painful and traumatic for Paul. He was beaten within an inch of his life, he was continually in danger, he had to continually listen to the must vicious and unfair accusations and attacks, and he had to stifle his extremely active spirit in order to accept years of imprisonment. Yet these were all small costs for the much larger reward of bearing witness where he otherwise could not (cf. Acts 23:11).

How does this help you now?

First, it means we need to look at both a) our own moral failures, and b) those by people around us and even against us. The Bible tells us that God never causes or tempts us to sin (James 1:13-14). Yet we also see (as in the case of Judas) that all sins are woven into a pattern by God's plan that is redemptive — it furthers his purposes and works out for our good (Gen.50:20). Another example is Jacob, who deceived his father and cheated his brother (Genesis 27), and whose sin dogged him all of his life with severe consequences (Genesis 28-29). But if he had not sinned he would not have found his great love, Rachel, nor carried on the Messianic line. Can we say that his sin was "fortunate" — no! It had terrible results in his life, and he regretted it all his life. Can we say then that his sin derailed God's plan for him — no! Clearly God worked even his moral failure into the right plan — plan "A" for his life. Joseph, as we have noted in a previous week, also saw God use other people's sins for good.

Second, it means we need to look at painful and difficult occurances and circumstances and see them through the "lens" of verses like Genesis 50:20 and Romans 8:28. This does not mean, on the one hand, that God is the author of evil (remember James 1:13). So when terrible things happen, we know he weeps with us. We can grieve over and fight evil and suffering in the world, as did Jesus. In John 11:38, he stood before the tomb of Lazarus, and the text tells us he "snorted in anger". Jesus, though he was God, was angry at suffering, yet not angry at himself. We are not to simply be passive toward evil and trouble in the world with a vague notion that "it's God's will". Notice how Paul does things. He definitely works to save himself from death, and he vigorously contests false accusations and injustice.

But, on the other hand, we are not to be petrified with fear or bitterness by troubles. We are to rest in the assurance that God will put a limit on and give a purpose to every difficulty. Evil cannot thwart God's purposes for the world or for you. This amazing balance again can be seen in Paul, who is very patient and calm throughout the arduous ordeals.

5. 26:1-23. Trace each stage of Paul's defense by giving a one sentence argument that summarizes his point in: vv.2-3, vv.4-8, vv.9-11, vv.12-16, vv.17-21, vv.22-23. Most of us do not have such dramatic "testimonies" such as this one, but what can we learn from Paul for our own sharing of our experience?

Trace each stage of the argument.

vv.2-3. Here Paul is not simply flattering the king, but signalling the direction of his case. a) He is going to assume that the king know much about Biblical teaching (*"you are well acquainted with Jewish customs and controversies"*), and b) he is going to assume that the king has the intelligence and intellectual seriousness to listen to a sustained argument (*"listen to me patiently"*). Paul has, therefore, assessed the his listener and adapted his argument to him. Then by giving him such a sincere compliment he, he begins the defense winsomely. Summary: **"I sense in you the intelligence to listen to a full presentation — so here goes."**

vv.4-11. Paul opens by showing evidence that he is completely committed to the Biblical faith of his fathers. He shows that he was a "Pharisee of the Pharisees" — as versed in and committed to the Biblical truth and Law of God as anyone ever has been. Also, like the Pharisees, he was committed to the future hope of the resurrection of the just. Summary: **"Despite the charges, my record shows that no one has studied and loved the Law of God or hoped in the resurrection more than I, and I have not changed!"**

vv.9-11. Here Paul brings out a second fact — his violent persecution of Christians. This important argument really makes several points. a) First, it proves again that he was very committed to the Biblical faith, and b) second, it also in a sense shows that he understands how people could be opposed to Christianity and see it as a betrayal of the faith. c) Third, this part of his record "sets us up" for the next stage of his case, since we now know that the evidence for Christ must have been very strong to turn around someone like this. Summary: **"Indeed, I can understand how my brothers feel--I once saw Christianity this way myself. But the evidence for Christ was so strong it changed my mind."**

vv.12-16. The first of the two lines of evidence that Paul uses is the reality of the resurrected Christ. Here Paul recounts his meeting with Christ on the Damascus road. That this was not a hallucination or just a personal vision is seen by the fact that "we all fell to the ground" when the blazing light of Jesus shone on Paul and his companions (v.13-14). In this version of his experience he stresses that he was to be sent out as a witness to the Christ he met. Summary: **"When I was confronted with the reality of the resurrected Christ, it changed the whole direction of my life."**

vv.17-21. Here Paul gives Agrippa the explanation for the hostility of Jewish leaders. It is not because he is being untrue to the Biblical faith and the hope of Israel (see vv.22-23), but because he proclaiming that through Christ the Gentiles can share and be included in the Biblical faith and the hope of Israel. Summary: **"I am accused not because I am unfaithful to our God, but because I teach that through Christ the Gentiles can also know our God."**

vv.22-23. The second of the two lines of evidence that Paul uses is the testimony of the Scriptures. He argues that the Bible pointed to and looked to Jesus Christ. Everything about him was predicted, namely, that through his work, his death and resurrection, he would bring salvation (*"light"*) to both Jew and Gentile. Notice this careful acknowledgement of a daring truth — that the Jews need salvation from Christ as much as the Gentiles. Here, though he is treading very lightly, Paul shows the real reason he is being persecuted. Not only is it that through Christ, the Gentiles can know the God of Israel, but only through Christ can the Jews be "right" with their own God. So, though Paul is proclaiming the God of Israel through the Scriptures of Israel and pointing to the hope of Israel (resurrection unto eternal life with God), he is putting Jew and Gentile on an equal spiritual footing. They equally need Christ's "light", and they can equally receive it. Summary: **"And when I looked at the Scripture, I found that it predicted this same Christ, through whom both Jew and Gentile can have the light of God."**

How does Paul's testimony give us pointers for our own?

There are numerous principles — here are just a few. The group can think of many others:

First, Paul shares his testimony repeatedly. This is the third time it is recorded in this book.

Second, Paul adapts his testimony each time. We will look at this more next week, but it is clear from a quick scan of the three accounts that there are significant differences. Why? It depends on who he is talking to. He plays up certain features and leaves others out depending on whether he is talking to secular people or religious people.

Third, Paul always concentrates as much on the personal life change as on the account of the experience itself. In each case, there is great stress on his fanatical and angry "before" condition contrasted with his new "after" condition. They are described in great detail. In the same way, it is important in our testimonies to talk about the actual difference Christ makes for us. It is easy to focus on the details of how you actually found Christ. Too much emphasis on that may give people the false impression that their own process must be just like yours.

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2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**

4. **Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?**

WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY.

Part 4a – The Challenge of Jesus Christ — His claims.
At the heart of the evidence for Christianity is a great conundrum. There is an unsurpassed moral and spiritual beauty about the character and the teaching of Jesus. Huston Smith, in *The World's Great Religions* says that only Buddha and Jesus so impressed their contemporaries that they were not just asked "who are you?" but "*what* are you?" But the difficulty for observers comes in just at this point, for Buddha asserted that he was *not* a god, but Jesus repeatedly and continually claimed to be *the* God, the Creator of the universe. So on the one hand, there is a person of supreme love and moral wisdom, but on the other, a man whose claims *"if not true, are those of a megalomaniac, compared with whom Hitler was the most sane and humble of men."* (C.S. Lewis)

But couldn't his followers have just make these divine claims up?
No. A number of reasons were given in sheet #1, above. But the main reason is that the original followers of Christ were Jews, and the divinity of a human being is the very last thing that first century Jewish minds would be able to make up. Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius *et al* were able, through strenuous, emphatic protestations, to convince their subsequent followers that they were not to be worshipped, that they were only teachers. Yet their first followers had views of God which allowed the possibility of a God-man. But first century Jews had a theology and a culture that in every regard was completely and totally resistent to the idea of God becoming human. The concept would not have even occurred to them. Many believe that Jesus, like all the other founders of great religions, was a humble sage who refused divine claims. But if Jesus had also denied that he was God, why would he have failed where the other founders succeeded, and with the least likely people on earth to divinize their teacher? The letters of Paul (written only 15-25 years after Jesus' death) and the even earlier hymns and creeds he quotes (like Phillipians 2:5-11) show that the Christians worshipped Jesus immediately after his death. The only fair explanation is that Jesus was the source of the claims — that his continual and powerful assertions of deity eventually broke through their walls of resistance.

But why couldn't he just have been a very good teacher?
The strength of the Christ's claims make that option impossible. First there were all this astounding indirect claims. (1) Jesus assumed authority to forgive all sins (Mark 2:7-10) — not just sins against him. Since we can only forgive sins that are against us, Jesus' premise is that all sins are against him, and therefore that he is God whose laws are broken and whose love offended in every violation. (2) Jesus claimed that he alone could give eternal life (John 6:39,40), though God alone has the right to give or take life. More than that, Jesus claimed to have a power that could actually eliminate death, and he

claims not just to have or bring a power to raise the dead, but to be *the* Power that can destroy death (John 11: 25-26). (3) Jesus claimed to have the truth as no one else ever has. All prophets said, "thus saith the Lord" but Jesus teaches with "but *I* say unto you" out of his own authority (Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32) And more than that, he claims not just to have or bring truth, but to be *the* Truth itself, the source and locus of all truth (John 14:6). (4) Jesus assumed the authority to judge the world (Mark 14:62). Since God alone has both the infinite knowledge and the right (as Creator and owner) to evaluate every person, Jesus premise is that he has both divine attributes. More than that, Jesus claimed that we will be judged in the end primarily on our attitude toward him (Matt.10:32,33; John 3:18). (5) Jesus assumed the right to receive worship (John 5:23, 9:38; Luke 5:8; John 20:28-29) which neither great persons nor even angels would accept (Rev.22:8,9; Acts 14:11-15). (6) His even off-hand statements and actions continually assume that he has divine status. He claims to have sent all the prophets and wise teachers in the world through all the centuries (Matt.23:34). (So he is claiming to be eternal.) He comes to the temple and says all the rules about observing the Sabbath are off now because the inventor of the Sabbath is now here (Mark 2:23-28). (So he is claiming to be Creator.) He puts his own knowledge on a par with God the Father's (Matt.11:27) (So he is claiming to be all-knowing). He claimed to be perfectly sinless (John 8:46). (So he is claiming to be completely holy.) He says that the greatest person in the history of the world was John the Baptist, but that the weakest follower of Christ is greater than he (Matt.11:11). This list could be stretched out indefinitely.

Then there are his direct claims, which are staggering. John Stott has organized his assertions this way. (1) To know him is to know God (John 8:19), (2) to see him was to see God (John 12:45), (3) to receive him is the receive the God (Mark 9:37). Only through him can anyone know or come to God (Matt.11:27; John 14:6). Even when Jesus called himself "*the* Son of God", he was claiming equality with the Father, since in ancient times an only son inherited all the father's wealth and position and was thus equal with him. The listeners knew that everytime Jesus called him self "*the* Son", he was naming himself as fully God (John 5:18). Finally, Jesus actually takes upon himself the divine name "I AM" (John 8:58, cf. Exodus 3:14; 6:33), claiming to the "Yahweh" who appeared to Moses in the burning bush.

We must remember one more point. Eastern religions were "pantheistic" and understand God to be the spiritual force in everything, so to say "I am part of God" or "I am one with God" is not terribly unusual. Western religions were "polytheistic" and believed in various gods who could take on human guises. But Jesus was Jew, and when he described God he meant the God who was

beginningless Creator who was infinitely exalted above everything else. This means that what he was saying was the most stupendous claim that anyone has ever made. And he did not make it once or twice. Rather, his was a consciousness which suffused everything he said and did. We cannot minimize these. If you heard a man saying "I have always existed, I created the world, I am ultimate reality. I will return at the end of time and your fate will depend on your obedience to me." — you could not laugh. You would reject him, or fear him, or attack him, but you could not consider him a fine moral teacher. He did not leave that open.

Please immediately read part 4b. These two parts go together.

Acts
Before Agrippa (Part II)

Study 27 | Acts 26:1-32

INTRODUCTION

Because this passage is so interesting and rich, we will continue looking at it this week. In case some people were not present last week, be sure to begin reading at chapter 26:1. Also, it may be a good idea to review the basic line of argument of verses 1-23. Refer to question #5 in the Week 26 study.

1. **22:12-18. How is this account of Paul's conversion different from the others — in 9:1-19; 22:5-16? How do those differences show Paul tailoring his presentation to his audience?**

There are several minor differences in the accounts and one major difference.

One minor differences has to do with what Paul's companions experienced. Some had seen these descriptions as blatantly contradicting one another, but it is difficult to imagine how Luke could have included them if they were so. If we put all the stories together, we assume that the men fell down with Paul, then stood up with Paul, seeing the light and hearing a noise without seeing either the actual figure of Jesus or his words.

Another minor difference is that Ananias is left out of this account, because Paul thought him to be an unnecessary figure to mention. His role was stressed the most when Paul gave his testimony before the angry crowd in Acts 22. Why? To a crowd of devout Jews, the mention of Ananias was important. He was probably well known to many of them and his witness would be very valuable in their eyes. It would make Paul's whole account more credible, since Paul is telling them of someone who could corroborate the story. On the other hand, Ananias would have been no one of importance to Festus and Agrippa.

The major difference is that only in this text do we learn Jesus said, *"It is hard for you to kick against the goads"* (v.14). This is an agricultural allusion, a "goad" being a sharp stick used to herd goats and other animals. Why would Paul bring this out here?

> "This… suggests that there was already in the depths of Paul's mind a half-conscious conviction that the Christian case was true. Stephen's arguments were perhaps more cogent than Paul allowed himself to admit… It was probably in large measure to stifle this conviction and impression that Paul threw himself so furiously into the campaign of repression. But the goad kept on pricking his conscience, until at last the truth that Jesus was risen indeed burst forth into full realization…"
>
> – F .F .Bruce, p.491

This statement from Jesus, then indicates that Paul's conversion was not quite as sudden as it might appear. There was a longer process of wrestling with the evidence. Paul himself had these same two kinds of evidence that he gives to Agrippa even before Damascus road experince — since a) there were hundreds

of eyewitnesses to the risen Christ in Jerusalem, and b) he heard the reasoning of Stephen from the Bible.

Paul is probably bringing this out because he is trying to bring Agrippa to Christ. He is beautifully showing that a very educated and sophisticated Jew can be converted by the evidence for Christ, even if it means wrestling deeply and even semi-consciously with it. Surely Paul is saying to Agrippa: "I know you might not be able to at first admit the attraction of Christ — I could not either. But ponder these things! If you are moved or convicted secretly, just know it is God after you, as he was after me." It is an extremely personal and bold appeal to Agrippa's heart. That appeal becomes even more overt in v.27 (see below).

Additional note: In this account of Paul's conversion, Christ's words to him through Ananias are merged with Christ's words to Paul directly on the Damascus road. This is because they are both about Paul's commission to go to the Gentiles. (**Note:** It is interesting to see how Paul can make these kind of significant editorial changes without contradicting himself or misleading. If we only had this last account, we'd think Jesus said some words on the road that we know from the other reports were said by Ananias. This sheds much light on the alleged "contradictions" in the gospels. Often two gospels tell of the same event and the accounts are fairly different in many details, such as quotation of Jesus' actual words, and so on. But Paul's three different accounts of his conversion show that an eyewitness recounting real historical events may slightly alter the narrative (through selective use of material and some conflation) for his own purposes of communication, without compromising the truth of the report.

2. 26:17-23. What does Paul tell Agrippa here about a) the need for salvation (our lost condition), b) the method of salvation (how to become a Christian), and finally, c) the ground of salvation (the reason God can save us)?

We really see Paul the evangelist at work in these final verses, especially. Though the ostensible purpose of the address is to clear him legally, his purpose is to convert his listeners, especially Agrippa. The audience saw Paul as the man in chains, but Paul spoke as the free man — and as if it were his audience in chains. He wants them to be as he is (v.29). Therefore, we see him providing some very clear summary statements of the gospel.

The need for salvation

In verse 18 we have a great little summary of conversion. The first half of the verse tells us what God does for us, and what condition we are in. He *"opens their eyes"* and breaks *"the power of Satan"* over us. In other words, we are spiritually blind and spiritually enslaved (though we don't know it). Our spiritual inability is such that God must turn us toward the light (cf. Acts 16:14).

The method of salvation

But the second half of the verse explains what we are to do. We a) *receive forgiveness of sins,* and b) *a place among those who are sanctified.* Becoming a Christian is to receive forgiveness — not to merit it or earn it. And we do not merely receive forgiveness (which is "negative" — a pardon for our failures), but we also receive a *"place"*, a reward, which is also *"received",* not earned. This is a place for those *"sanctified by faith in me (Christ)."* It is common for us to think of "sanctification" as only the process of becoming more godly, and often the word is used like that. But the word "sanctified" usually means to be "set apart as holy". Since the word is in the past tense in v.18, we see what an tremendous offer this is. The word *"received"* does not only refer to the forgiveness, but to the place. So, when we believe in Christ, we receive — then and there — both a pardon and a standing with God, in which he treats us as holy and sanctified.

We also must not be too individualistic in our reading of v.18. Paul is not just promising a place, but a place *among.* We are received into a community, a family. When we get God as our Father, we immediately and automatically get a new set of brothers and sisters.

> "For the new life in Christ and the new community of Christ always go together. What was specially significant was that the Gentiles were to be granted a full and equal share with the Jews in the privileges of those sanctified by faith in Christ, that is, the holy people of God."
>
> – Stott, p. 374

The ground of salvation

Without verse 23, though, it would be hard to see what *"faith in… [Christ]"* is. In verse 23 he makes it clear that it is not faith in Christ as Teacher or example (though he was a peerless Teacher and a perfect example). Rather, it is though what he did — his death and resurrection — that secures for us our forgiveness and our place. So we do not become Christians by just "living for Christ" in some general way, but by transferring our trust and faith from our efforts and work to Christ's efforts and work. Summary: Paul is saying, **"When we believe in Christ, we receive complete pardon, and we are accepted by the Father as holy and blameless in Christ."**

3. 26:24-27. How does Paul summarize his two lines of argument in a final stunning, direct appeal to the king?

Paul's final appeal is remarkable, both for its boldness and for its brilliance. It was bold because it was so direct. Imagine — to try to press the king, to put him "on the spot". Very dangerous. But it was brilliant.

First, Paul again presses his "historical" line of evidence and argument. He counters Festus' outburst that his message is not wishful thinking or fantasizing — it is *"most true and reasonable"* (v.25). He does not say, "well, I just know this because I feel it so strongly". Rather, he insists that it is rational to be a Christian. Then he makes a vivid statement, *"the king [knows]… these things...for it was not done in a corner"* (v.26). Paul has such confidence that the miracles and ministry and death of Christ, and the resports by eyewitnesses of the resurrection — none of this could have escaped the king's knowledge. This is very important to notice. It is now 25 years after the death of Chrsit, and yet Paul is able (at such a crucial moment) to assume that anyone who has lived in or around Jerusalem would have known about all these matters. He can say, "without fear of contradiction — the king knows about this man Jesus, the miracles he did, and how his tomb is empty, and how many people have claimed to see him risen." Amazing! These facts were so well known that even unbelievers and enemies couldn't deny them. So though Paul knew that the entire story would seem ridiculous to a Gentile pagan like Festus, he knew that Agrippa could be challenged and would not be able to deny the basic features of the life of Jesus. That is why he makes this bold move. And Agrippa's response shows that he could not deny what Paul said (see below).

Second, Paul also returns to the predictions of the prophets and the Scripture. *"King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."* (v.27). So Paul has boxed the King in. And his response has been variously interpreted. Some see it as a joking statement (said with a laugh), some see it as an outburst of anger, and some see it as a statement that he is sincerely interested (though Paul is going too fast for him). Which is it? It is hard to know. (Maybe it is all three!) No matter what his emotion or motivation, however, his statement does not answer Paul's challenge or question. Paul clearly had the king at a spot where he had to simply change the subject.

Paul's final statement is a lesson in communication. Whether Agrippa's statement was a joke, an outburst, or a request — Paul responds to it as if it were said in a positive way. He says, basically, "I don't care how long you take! I only want you to all know him as I do."

4. Should we be as direct in our argumentation as Paul was?

This question is not asking whether we should be as calm and confident and courageous as Paul. We should all be like that always in our discussions with non-Christians. But besides this confidence, Paul was also very relentless in his argumentation and questioning of the king. Commentators believe it was a breach of etiquette for Paul to have addressed Agrippa directly, let alone to put him on the spot with such a pointed question, especially one that would be so embarassing for him to answer either way. (If the king said that he did believe the prophets, it would be like agreeing with Paul — but if he denied that he

believed the prophets, it would be a slap to his heritage.) So Paul was very "direct" because he did not provide Agrippa with any easy or gracious way to escape his argument. Should we be as relentless and direct as Paul?

The only right answer will be — it depends! First, boldness depends on the situation. The more public it is (as in this case) the more you need to be fairly direct. The more private you are the more you should be gentle, the more you should listen, the less you should "go for the jugular". With individuals you should not push your arguments if they are not responding well. Second, boldness depends on your level of knowledge and wisdom. Of course, there was no better evangelist in history (probably) than the apostle Paul. Even so, we know he took years of study and reflection (see Galatians 1:17-18) before beginning such a ministry. We also know he spent several hours a day for two years speaking with non-Christians in a public forum in Ephesus (cf.19:9-10). Two years of daily dialogues! So Paul knew what he was doing — not just through gifts, but through plain practice. Most of us need far more practice before we can he push so brilliantly. Thirdly, boldness depends on spiritual discernment. Paul was a very godly man, and he probably evaluated Agrippa's condition and assessed that he was ripe for such a thrust.

Because most of our evangelistic discussions are private, and because few of us are either as knowledgeable or as discerning as Paul, we should be very leery of getting into extended intellectual debates with non-Christians. And when we do, we should generally not try to "trap" people with arguments so that there is "no way out" for them.

5. 26:30-32. Once again, Luke shows that Paul is not guilty — and that Christianity is not disruptive to public order and society? Why do you think Luke is pressing this point so much? How can we make the same case today?

If there is time to do this question, refer to the last question in the Week 24 study.

Luke keeps showing that Paul is repeatedly found "not guilty" of undermining the peace by one magistrate after another. He also shows Paul relying on Roman justice and finding it fair and upright. Why was Luke so keen to demonstrate this? In the early centuries of its life, enemies of the faith asserted that Christians could not be faithful to Caesar, and therefore the spread of Christianity was bad for society. Why would anyone say this? Weren't there many religions in the empire?

Yes, but Christianity challenged the fundamental premise of that pagan world, which was religious pluralism. The pagans believed that there were many "gods", that every group and nationality and region and area of life had its own "god". And no one claimed that they had the supreme God over every nation or area of life. Rather, everyone had their own religion and their own god which only extended over a limited "turf". The reason this was important in the

Roman world was that this opened the way for the emperor and other royal persons to be worshipped as gods themselves. Thus "institutionalized polytheism" allowed human rulers to take enormous power and to make divine claims. In a polytheistic culture, in which no one god is supreme, citizens were used to worshipping a small number of gods — and they could also worship Caesar. Also, each city had a patron deity which gave the rulers of that city power and clout.

But Christianity threatened this entire system. Even the Jews, who believed in one supreme God, still (wrongly) understood him as belonging only to them. Thus Judaism ironically fit into the pagan schema, at least as it appeared to the pagans from the outside. To the Romans, Yahweh was just the God of the Jews. But the gospel of Christ was unique, because it not only proclaimed one supreme God, but one whose authority extended over every area of life and every nation in the world.

> "The message of Christ inevitably posed a threat to the institutionalized religious pluralism of the Hellenistic-Roman world. When the apostles proclaimed a message from the living God, who alone 'created heaven and earth and all that fills them', they challenged not merely marble images in a city's temple, but the very concept of divine patrons governing different regions or spheres of life. Such a message… could be seen as dangerous, insulting to civic dignity, and disruptive of the fabric of social order."
>
> – Dennis Johnson, The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption, p.190

What Luke (and other Christian writers) had to show the world was that the gospel did make people great neigbors and citizens, and that the spread of Christianity was healthy for society. From the outside, Christianity almost has to look like arrogance — because people outside of Christianity (by definition) cannot understand that salvation is by grace. Thus they assume that anyone who thinks they are right with the one and only God will necessarily feel very morally superior, and will not serve their neighbors and honor and respect their rulers who are not Christians. However, from the inside, the gospel humbles us deeply and sends us out with radical love. Since salvation is by grace, we expect many non-Christians to be wiser and more talented and healthier in many respects. Since salvation is by grace, we want to serve others graciously as we were served.

How can we possibly, then, convince a the world that the spread of the gospel makes the world a better place? Only by our example. That is what Luke is doing. He shows the Roman world that Paul humbly respects and trusts Roman justice, even when declaring categorically that Jesus is the Supreme Lord of every single square inch of reality. What is impossble for the world to see is that this absolute Lordship is what makes us not hostile to but filled with concern for our neighbors and our world, and ready to express that concern through deeds of mercy and justice.

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

The following is part of a series of sheets to give and discuss with friends who don't believe the Christian faith. This particular set of sheets is the most difficult. With many people, it would be good to skip some or all of them. But they will be absolutely necessary with a number of people, especially those who have thought through their objections to Christianity in a coherent way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**

4. **Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?**

WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY.

Part 4b – The Challenge of Jesus Christ — His character
The first part of the challenge of Jesus Christ is the extraordinarily self-centered teaching. We must try to grasp how absolutely astounding these claims were to the listeners. We can do that partially by imagining how you yourself would react if a neighbor of yours began to claim that he or she was the Creator of the universe who would judge the world. You would almost certainly regard your neighbor as either insane or fraudulent. That, of course, explains the actual historical record of human reactions to him. He spawned either passionate worshippers or furious people who wanted to kill him. If he was a "good, moral teacher", we cannot explain either the worshippers *or* his execution. Anyone who knew anything about him knew that there were only three possibile explanations for him: he was either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord he claimed to be.

Well, why could he not have been a fraud, then? There have been lots of cult leaders who claimed to be divine.
This brings us to the second part of the challenge of Jesus Christ. What is startling is not just that his claims that were so self-centered, but that his character and his actions were so completely unself-centered. The accounts of him in the New Testament speak for themselves. He combines qualities that no one ever has. Despite his incredible claims, we never see him pompous or offended or standing on his own dignity. (As one said, "*in thought he put himself first; in deed, last*".) Despite being absolutely approachable to the weakest and most broken people, he is completely fearless before the proud and corrupt. Despite being profoundly human, and becoming weary and lonely and moved to joy and love and anger, yet we never see him moody, we never see him inconsistent, we never see him being strong where he should be tender or tender where he should be strong. Most interesting of all, in the accounts of his dealings with people, he is continually surprising us, shocking us, yet never disappointing us. One writer summed it up with a remarkable challenge:

> "No one has ever yet discovered the word Jesus ought to have said or the deed he ought to have done. Nothing he does falls short, in fact, he is always surprising you and taking your breath away, because he is incomparably better than you could imagine for yourself. Why? They are the surprises of perfection. He is tenderness without weakness, strength without harshness, humility without the slightest lack of confidence, holiness and unbending convictions without the slightest lack of approachability, power without insensitivity, passion without prejudice. There is never a false step, never a jarring note. This is life at the highest."

notes

But can we really be sure those Biblical stories aren't embellished and idealized?
We should reflect on why it is that no major religion has a founder which claimed to be God, (though many tiny, unsuccessful cults have). There have been many people in history who have made divine claims, but they have never been able to make their assertions broadly believable except to that tiny percentage of the population which is unusually credulous or emotionally needy. Why not? First, there are always people who have grown up with and lived with the claimant, and they know his or her character flaws. Second, there is a huge resistance in the human mind to such an assertion. In Jesus' case, we must also remember that, though there were Jews who claimed to be the Messiah, there has never been a member of that culture in its 4,000 year history who has even made such an allegation, let alone got anyone to believe it.

Yet this is what Jesus did. Does a liar produce the kind of humble, utterly selfless, sacrificial, forgiving lifestyle that Jesus had? What kind of life must Jesus have had to have led to overcome the profound resistance of Jews to such unique claims? What kind of life must Jesus have had to have led to convince even the people who lived with him? What kind of life would Jesus have had to have led to do what no other person in history has ever done — convince more than a tiny percentage of unbalanced people that he is the Creator and Judge of the universe? It would have to have been like the incomparable life depicted in the New Testament.

Maybe, then, he really was insane?
But this possibility is greatly undermined by the almost universally acclaimed wisdom and beauty of Jesus' teaching. The great consensus of history is that the teaching of Jesus is at least as remarkable and brilliant as that of any other great sage. G.K. Chesterton wrote:

> "If I found a key on the road and discovered it fit and opened a particular lock, I'd assume most likely the key was made by the lockmaker. If I find a set of teaching set out in pre-modern Oriental society that has proven itself of such universal validity that it has fascinated or satisfied millions of people in every century, including the best minds and yet the simplest hearts, that it has made itself at home in virtually every culture, inspired masterpieces in every field of art, and continues to grow and spread rapidly… [even today], are they likely to be the work of a deceiver or a fool? In fact, it is more likely they were designed by the heart-maker."

In summary, then. The claims of Jesus make it impossible that he would be just a good man. The character and teaching of Jesus make it nearly impossible to believe that he was a deceiver or insane. The resurrection of Jesus clinches the case.

But it is crazy and ridiculous to believe that a human being could be God? Amazing — yes. But why is it ridiculous? Once we remove a dogmatic bias against miracles (see sheet #2), then it is even more crazy and ridiculous to believe the alternatives to the Christian explanation for the phenomenon of Jesus. How could a man who produced a kind of life and teaching that has never been produced before be a liar or a lunatic? How could a man make the claims he did and make good on them? How could hundreds of people be deceived into thinking they saw him alive after his resurrection? Yet if they were not deceived, but deceivers, why would have they lived and died sacrificially for a hoax? As hard as it is to believe that he is God come to earth, it is more difficult not to. Is it really impossible for God to become human? Why, if God is really all powerful, could he not have done it? And why, if God is really all-loving, would he not have done it?

Acts

Shipwreck

Study 28 | Acts 27:1-44

INTRODUCTION

This description of the voyage to Rome has been admired by many scholars for its accuracy. It would be of great benefit to the study if most of the members had a map of the Mediterranean to refer to during the discussion. Many Bibles include a set of maps in the back, including a map of "Paul's Journeys". Make sure there are at least a couple of such maps for your use. Another note: In verse 9, there is a reference to "the Fast" which means Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which ordinarily fell in late September or early October. Any time after the fast, sea travel in the Mediterranean is extremely dangerous, because storms come up quickly and fiercely during that season. By November, all sea travel ceased until the Spring.

There are many nautical terms and practices mentioned that are not familiar to most readers today, especially the passage vv.13-20 which describes the original onset of the great storm. Here are some background notes that might be of some help: The great storm was such an old enemy of sailors that is had a special name, *"Euraquilo"*, literally a "nor'easter". When the storm hit, the sailors did the following: a) v.16. First, they tried to find some shelter from the wind on the lee side of an island called Cauda (the "lee" is the side away from the wind). b) v.16b Second, they struggled to haul in the lifeboat (which was towed astern in fair weather, but which probably had flooded with water at the sudden onset of the storm). c) v.17a Third, they actually "frapped" the boat itself with cables around it which they lashed tightly to keep it from breaking apart. d) v.17b Fourth, for fear of being driven on to the Syrtis sand banks off the Libyan coast, they lowered a piece of equipment variously translated "sea anchor" (NIV) or "the mainsail" (NEB) — (we don't know what the Greek word means!) d) v.18 Fifth, they jettisoned some of the cargo, and e) v.19 sixth, they through overboard as much of the ship's tackle and equipment as they could spare.

1. **27:1-12. The account of Paul's voyage to Rome is vivid with details. Why does Luke know so much about the voyage? Make a list of the statements in these early verses that indicate first hand experience (that the narrator could not know from simply looking at a map).**

One of the most famous confirmations of Luke's report is James Smith's *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St.Paul*. Smith was Scottish sailor in the nineteenth century who lived in Gibraltar, Lisbon and Malta, and spent the winter 1844-45 investigating the account of Paul's voyage by Luke in chapter 27. His conclusion was the portrayal was done by a non-sailor, nevertheless by someone who was an eyewitness to the events. *"No sailor would have written in a style so little like that of a sailor; no man not a sailor could have written a narrative of a sea voyage so consistent in all its parts, unless from actual observation."* (quoted in Stott, p. 386).

notes

SHIPWRECK

How does the text indicate why Luke knew so much about this voyage.

The word *"we"* in the first verse introduces the fourth and final "we-section", which runs from 27:1 to 28:16. This is a claim by the author that he was along on the voyage itself. The vivid details in all the "we-sections" are of course due to the fact that Luke was writing from first hand memory, and not relying on the accounts of other sources.

A list of comments that could not be known from a map.

Verse 2 – *"we boarded a ship… about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia"*. This first ship was a "coasting vessel", which was something like a "local" rather than an "express" train — it was not made for sailing the open sea, but for working its way in the shallow water right along the land, moving from port to port.

Verse 4 – *"we… passed to the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us."* Those familiar with those waters know that the prevailing winds throughout the summer season blow from west to east. Since the winds were against them, they sailed to the east and north ("the lee") of Cyprus, though it was a longer route, so that the island could shelter them from the strength of the winds. (In 21:1-3, when Paul was making a trip in the reverse direction, he sailed south of Cyprus, to make use of the wind.)

Verse 6 – *"at Myra in Lycia… the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board"*. Julius was looking to transfer in any port to a ship bound for Italy. Myra was a very likely place, since *"Myra was one of the chief ports of the grain fleet that plied between Egypt and Rome… Egypt was the chief granary of Rome, and the corn trade between Alexandria and Rome was of the highest importance".* Luke later mentions in v.38 that there was a cargo of grain on board. This all fits what we know about the economy of the region.

Verse 7 – "*we made slow headway… and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus"*. Ships heading west could work against a westerly wind by sticking very close to the coast as far as Cnidus. The sailor Smith writes that part of the coast: *"is peculiarly favourable for navigation by such vessels, because the coast is bold and safe, the elevation of the mountains makes it visible at a great distance, and the sinuosities of its shores… would enable them, if the wind was at all off the land, to work windward at least as far as Cnidus, where these advantages ceased."* (quoted in Bruce, p.503)

Verse 8 – *"we sailed to the lee of Crete"*. Since the west wind continued, they now could not cut straight over the lower end of the Aegean Sea, but rather had to sail oblique to the wind, almost due south. By sailing south of Crete, they show us that the wind was now north-westerly, which Smith says is just the sort of wind common in that region in the late summer.

Verse 12 – *"since the harbor [Fair Havens] was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on hoping to reach Phoenix… facing both southwest and northwest"*. Those familiar with the region know that the great danger in those seas was the "nor' easter", a hurricane force wind that can smash boats even in a harbor. Fair Havens *"stood open to nearly half the compass"* (Bruce, p.507) and was ill-suited to protect the boat from such a storm. So the ship owner and the centurion sought to find a safer harbor that they new on Crete, further to the west.

2. 27:1-26. How does God give Paul encouragement during the voyage? How has God sustained you during tough "voyages"?

First, God gives Paul two forms of Christian fellowship.

It is remarkable that both Luke and Aristarchus (cf.19:29) were able to go with Paul, in the company with *"other prisoners"* (v.1). The the second ship in particular was not a simple passenger vessel but was actually a state ship, under the direct authority of the Roman government for grain trade (see Bruce, p.503). Why would the Roman centurion let two men simply "tag along" for a long, costly, and dangerous journey? Some commentators have argued that Luke and Aristarchus must have travelled as Paul's slaves:

"…not merely performing the duties of slaves… but actually passing as slaves. In this way not merely had Paul faithful friends always beside him; his importance in the eyes of the centurion was much enhanced, and this was of great importance. The narrative clearly implies that Paul enjoyed much respect during this voyage, such as a penniless traveller without a servant to attend on him would never receive either in the first century…" (Sir William Ramsay, quoted in Bruce, p.501).

This is speculatve, of course, but it shows us that, however Luke and Aristarchus did it, they overcame very great obstacles in order to be sure that Paul did not face this great trial alone.

But in addition to these two companions, God provides a very unexpected episode of encouragement and spiritual refreshment at Sidon (v.3) when the centurion Julius allowed him to disembark and spend time with the Christians of the church in that town. Again, we don't know the circumstances that led to this unusual privilege. How had Paul impressed the commander so much that he trusted his prisoner to leave and return? That does not matter. What is interesting is that the Christians in Sidon saw to *"his needs"* — which could not mean his physical needs. Surely Paul had sufficient food and other basic necessities. Rather, this must refer to the deep encouragement of Christian love.

The basic lesson of these verses is that Christian fellowship is a "need", which we neglect to our peril. God provided both abiding fellowship (in Luke and Aristarchus) and intense fellowship episodes in order to sustain Paul through his ordeal.

Second, God agains sends Paul a special word of encouragement (v.23-25) which we discuss under the next question. At this point, though it is important to see this pattern with God. Every few years, in times of extreme trial, God gives Paul a special word of encouragement direct to his heart. We saw that God did this in Corinth (18:9) and in Jerusalem (23:11). We have pointed out before that we do not need to read this as a promise that Jesus will give us dreams and visions. But it does show us that God will, by his Spirit, bring his Word home to our hearts in unusually vivid ways. (That is what Paul prays for the Ephesians in Eph.1:18-21 and Eph.3:14-29).

Therefore we have two basic ways for God to encourage us during times of ordeals — his Words (brought home to us by the Spirit), and fellowship with his children.

3. Compare Paul's predictions in v.10 and vv.21-25. Does he contradict himself here? Have you ever experienced a disaster a) which was do to your refusal to take advice, yet b) was graciously eased and lightened by God?

Compare v.10 and v.22 predictions.

At first sight, Paul seems to be starkly contradicting himself, since in v.10 he says that he fears *"great loss to ship… and to our own lives also"*, but in v.21 he says very definitely that *"not one of you will be lost: only the ship will be destroyed".* But two factors show us why Paul has warrant to change his mind on this.

First, the v.10 prediction is very vague — he does not say the ship will be destroyed or who will die, only that there will be *"disaster"* and *"loss".* He actually makes no prediction one way or the other about the ship or the life of anyone. He is saying, "I foresee a disaster at sea if we continue — with terrible loss, perhaps even to all our lives." Here he claims no divine authority for what he is saying — he later called it just *"advice"* (v.21), and therefore we can assume that he is speaking as an unusually seasoned traveller in the Mediterranean. It is often overlooked that Paul had a previous terrifying experience at sea. He told the Corinthians in a letter previous to this event that he had once spent 24 hours in the open sea until he was either picked up or washed ashore (II Cor.11:25). We can imagine that anyone who has been through an experience like that is going to be extremely wary and cautious about seafaring for the rest of his life! Thus when they passed the date of the Fast, Paul's heart and intuition told him that they should stay put and stay on land. Therefore, Paul's original prediction, seen as a general warning, was absolutely right.

Second, in his v.21 prediction he explains that he has had a divine revelation through an angel, which revised his original intuition. Now he is told that there is going to be a definite loss of ship, but there is not going to be any loss of life, due to the *"graciousness"* of God (v.24).

Have you ever experienced a disaster like this?

It is not hard to see the two features of Paul's disaster as being typical of many of our life events.

First, many times we are caught in "life storms" because we failed to heed a very basic principle or command of God. The 10 commandments, lay down maybe the most basic — don't lie, be diligent and loving, don't have sex outside marriage, honor your parents. Though the world is filled with terrible suffering and evil that can overtake us even if we walk obediently, it is amazing how many of our "life storms" were due to failing to take the advice of God's Word. It is ironic that, since Paul has written so much of the New Testament — many of us have been in exactly the same "boat" as the sailors, with our lives coming apart because we failed to take Paul's advice. For example, one man I know ran aground because he incurred too much debt and ignored Paul's direction to incur few debts and pay off the ones you have promptly (Rom.13:8). Also, many people think Paul is a prude when it come to sex (a mistaken view), but have dismissed his advice to their peril and pain.

Second, most of us can also list the many times we invited disaster, but God *"graciously"* (v.24) lessened the consequences, and we escaped basically unscathed, just as he so kindly allowed the crew and passengers of Paul's vessels to escape. Many of us have taken stupid and selfish risks, or have mistreated others, or have lied and cheated, or have broken promises, but God mitigated the outcomes so they were not nearly as damaging as they could have been.

One minister has said, "Never, ever ask God for justice. You might get it." The theological principle behind this striking statement is helpful. We tend to keep a record of all the times and places where we did not get the good outcomes we thought we deserved. But we don't keep a record of all the times God prevented us from receiving the bad outcomes we deserved.

4. Compare the response to Paul's advice v.10 and v.30-32? Why do they follow his leadership at the end but not at the beginning? What does this tell us about leadership in general? How did Paul's leadership save everyone's life twice (v.31-32; 42-22)?

Compare the response of v.10 and v.30-32.

Why did the men listen to Paul in the storm at v.30-32 but did not listen to him in v.10? There are two reasons — one obvious and one not so obvious.

The obvious reason is that Paul was proved right about the danger of proceeding. Though many of the men were sailors, Paul had proven that his extensive experience had given him excellent nautical expertise. Therefore he had shown his seafaring wisdom to be the equal of theirs, if not superior. This certainly had an impact on the crew. Previously they had probably thought he was just another "landlubber"; now they realized his background and competence in these matters.

But there is a less obvious reason that they began to follow him. It is most interesting to see how Paul in v.21-22 uses the fact that he had been right and they wrong about the decision to sail. On the one hand, he does remind them that his judgment had been vindicated (*"Men, you should have taken my advice…"*). But Paul does not have a proud or "I told you so" attitude. The only reason he brings up this up is not to rub their noses in it, but only so that they will now listen to his assurance and comfort. *"You should have taken my advice… but now I urge you to keep up your courage"* (v.22). See his point? He says, "I only mention my previous advice so you will now take my current advice. Don't panic! I assure you that we will all be saved! Keep up your courage." (v.22) How interesting — Paul only commends himself to the extent necessary for them to listen to his comfort.

Why is this the second reason that they listen to him in v.30-32? If Paul had lorded it over them and mocked them for their stupidity, they would certainly not have followed his leadership later. He demonstrated his concern for them, and he probably got up and gave them this assuring speech at a time when nearly everyone would have been in despair of survival. We all know that the biggest skeptics and unbelievers are quite happy to have someone pray over them before major surgery, and in the same way, these pagan men were deeply grateful and strengthened by the words of this man, no matter what his beliefs.

What does this tell us about leadership?

Most modern students of leadership notice that there is a "task" dimension and a "relational" dimension to leadership. On the one hand, we must get our jobs done promptly and expertly. We have to reach our goals. On the other hand, we must show concern for the people we are working with, listening to their concerns and meeting their needs. Of course, the challenge of leadership is how to balance both. If we simply push forward to our goals without concern for people, we eventually will not get to our goals, because no one will listen to us or follow us. But if we focus so much on relationships with people that we do not reach our goals, then people will not follow us either, since we want leaders who are competent, who can produce.

Though Paul was only a prisoner, and he never sought to literally take the leadership away from the boat owner or the centurion, yet he so beautifully demonstrated both the two sides of leadership. On the one hand, he proved that he was not just well-meaning and kind, but competent. He knew how to get them home. On the other hand, he proved he was deeply concerned for all

the men on the boat. If he had failed to show them either quality, they would not have listened to him at the moment of crisis. It has ever been so.

How did Paul's leadership save everyone's life twice?

In vv.31-32, Paul forbid the sailors to abandon ship. If they had done so, they would have been lost in the little lifeboat, and the "landlubbers" on the ship would have been helpless in the storm and died on the boat.

In vv.42-45, the soldiers wanted to kill all the prisoners. Since the prisoners were their responsibility, they would be held accountable for any who escaped. In a ship wreck, of course, there would be no way to keep control of their charges. But the actions of Paul had deeply impressed many of the men, and especially the centurion. To save Paul's life, the commander refused to let the prisoners be slain.

5. a) What tension is there between Paul's prediction of v.22 and his command in v.31? b) How do these two statements show the unique view of Christianity with regards to the old "fate vs. free will" debate? c) Why is this view so intensely practical for our daily living?

What tension is there between v.22 and v.31

The tension is very remarkable. When Paul declares that *"not one of you will be lost"* (v.22) he invokes divine authority. This was a revelation of God, direct from an angel; this was not Paul's opinion or intuition. Now that means that this historical outcome is fixed — it cannot be in doubt. The Bible says that God does not change his mind or repent (I Samuel 15:29). Also, in Deuteronomy 18:21-22, we are told flatly that any prophet whose prophecy does not come is a false prophet. Therefore, if Paul really has a divine revelation, there is no possibility that anyone will die. However, when the sailors tried to escape, Paul says, that they will die unless the sailors stay (v.31). It is striking that Paul does not feel or say, "since I know we are all going to be saved, it does not matter what we do!" Rather, he says that everyone has to act responsibly if they are to reach safety.

How is this a unique approach to the "fate vs. free will" debate?

For centuries, human thinking has given us two either-or options to answer the question: "why does a particular event in history happen?" One answer has been **"fate"**. This view states that human agents are not causing history through their choices, but history is conditioning and causing their choices. Things happen because they are destined and fixed, either by blind chance or or blind "Fate" or by some God. Different religions and philosophies have had different versions of this view, but the best example of this generic approach is the story of Oedipus. He is fated to kill his father and marry his mother (as the oracle predicts at his birth). Because of this prediction, every effort is made to thwart fate, but in the end, despite all the choices of human beings, he lives

out his fate. The second answer is **"free will"**, meaning that human choices can alter the events of history. Many science fiction stories are based on this idea, for example the popular "Back to the Future" movies. In this view, our decisions and choices affect the flow of history and future events.

But Paul's actions show that Christianity does not buy into either view. Unique among all the religions and philosophies, it insists both that everything is determined by the plan of God and our choices and decisions matter, are significant, make a difference. There is no other way to explain Paul's behavior. Christianity, in other words, believes *historical events are determined by God through our choices*. While the "fatalist" view believes that historical events are determined in spite of our choices, and the "free will" view believes that historical events are not determined at all. They are caused by us.

Why is this view so intensely practical?

Intellectually, this subject gives people fits. Most people find it inexplicable that Paul could know that they were fated to survive yet be so adamant that they had to act in a certain way. This shows that most of us cannot escape the "either-or" dichotomy in our mind. We think "either things are fixed, and it doesn't matter what we do, or it matters what we do, so not everything is fixed." And it is not easy to explain logically how the two things — God's absolute sovereignty and human responsibility — can co-exist together. There have been some good efforts, but we won't go into them here.

The beauty of the Christian view is seen mainly in how absolutely practical it is. Think. If, on the one hand, everthing was fixed *despite* our actions, what possible incentive would I have to work hard, to do my best? On the other hand, if my decisions really determined my life course and the course of history, I would be afraid to make any choices at all. If we think back a few years, we can always see how completely wrong we were about such important issues. How could I have the confidence to make choices, knowing how limited my wisdom is, if I know they can revise God's plan for me? But if we look at Paul we see exactly how this unique approach can give us enormous strength. On the one hand, we have to strain every nerve and fibre to do our best, because our behavior counts and our choices have real consequences. On the other hand, we can relax, knowing that whatever we do or whatever happens, it cannot change God's wise purposes and plan for us.

The other views are most *im*practical. Anyone who takes the "free will" view ought to be extremely frightened (if they are not, it is because of either pride or an failure to reflect). Anyone who takes the "fate" view will be indifferent, passive, and cynical. The Christian, though, can be like Paul — so calm yet alert in storms that he saves the day.

Acts
To Rome (finally!)

Study 29 | Acts 28:1-31

1. 28:1-16. This is the end of the story of Paul's journey to Rome. Many people think this account was too long in proportion to its value. Do you? Why?

Many people have thought that, because of the length of this narrative, it must have some "deeper, spiritual meanings". F. F. Bruce and John Stott tell us of numerous attempts to read the voyage as an elaborate allegory. Stott tells us of one writer who interpreted the story as teaching that Paul's boat is the Church, and as teaching that, though the church began in good condition at its origin in Jerusalem, it rode to its moral and spiritual destruction in Rome, that is, in the Roman Catholic Church! (Obviously, the interpreter was a somewhat over-zealous Protestant.) Others have seen the ship owner as representing false teachers and leaders in the church, but have seen the centurion as representing those leaders who listen to the Bible (Paul). We hope it goes without saying that such fanciful interpretations undermine the credibility and the authority of the Bible.

Why then does Luke think this voyage so valuable for his readers to know about? Certainly (as we saw last week) there are numerous valuable insights that this account brings us. It a) drives home the historicity of the New Testament, b) it teaches us of the value of fellowship, c) it shows us something of the nature of leadership, d) it provides an example of how to respond in crisis conditions.

But probably the main purpose of Luke is to show the relationship between God's providential control of history and the witness and mission of the church. All through the book of Acts, the primary theme has been the communication of the gospel through more and more of the world. The early chapters tended to show the gospel breaking through barrier after barrier with success after success. There is Pentecost (chapter 2), the healing of the crippled beggar (chapter 3), the bold defenses before the Sanhedrin and the apostles' release (chapter 4 and 5), the public denouncement of Simon the Sorcerer (chapter 8), the mission to Samaria (chapter 8), the conversion of the church's chief enemy, Saul (chapter 9), the conversion of Cornelius (10-11), the planting of the church at Antioch (chap 11), Peter's miraculous escape from prison (chap 12), the striking down of Herod Agrippa I (chapter 12), and the highly successful missionary journeys of Paul (chapter 13 on). Outside of the death of Stephen, there is almost an unrelenting series of dramatic victories.

If Luke had ended the book at chapter 20, the reader would certainly gotten the false impression that "if you serve God, he will give you victory after victory". But the history of Paul's imprisonment, trials, and voyage to Rome gives us a whole new perspective. Throughout these accounts (and especially in the story of the voyage) we are given the profound lessons: that God works out his purposes for the spread of his kingdom, even (and sometimes especially) through our weakness and 'defeats'. In chapter after chapter we see how God controls history through apparent "accidents", despite hostile behavior of his enemies, despite the sins and flaws of is people, and even through difficulties

and sufferings for his best servants. The case study is right here — God gets Paul to Rome and opens doors for him to preach the gospel in the most strategic places, yet he does so through imprisonment, danger, and trouble. John Stott says:

> "Paul had expressed his desire to proceed straight from Jerusalem to Rome (Rom.15:25-29). Instead, he was arrested in Jerusalem, subjected to endless trials, imprisoned in Caesarea, threatened with assassination… then nearly drowned in the Mediterranean, killed by soldiers, and poisoned by a snake! …We must remember that the sea, reminiscent of primeval chaos, was a regular Old Testament symbol of evil powers in opposition to God… But by God's providence, Paul reached Rome safe and sound, but he arrived as a prisoner."
>
> – Stott, p. 402

What does this mean to us? It means we must not set ourselves up for disappointment by assuming that God only gives his servants comfortable lives. It also means we must assume (even when we can't see them) that there are ways that our trials and difficulties can make us more effective representatives of the kingdom than if our lives were going smoothly. And extreme example could be Joni Eareckson, a Christian woman who as a quadriplegic has been a help to many, but who, without the injury, might have never a) found God as she did, nor b) been such an instrument to help people.

2. 28:17-28. What does Paul's movements in these verses tell you about his ministry strategy?

First, he's a man of consistency. He continues to go to the Jews first with his message (see Romans 1:16-17). He does so because of his loyalty to his own people, and because the Messiah has come to fulfill the hopes of Israel, and therefore they above all others should be able to rejoice in and appreciate it.

Second, he's a man of integrity. It is amazing that, considering what the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had done to him, that he was willing to call the Jews of Rome together and tell them of the charges against him! This shows that Paul did not deceive, he was a man who operated "up front". He let people know what he was about. (We must remember, however, that we have seen numerous times how much Paul adapted his communication to audiences, being careful not to needlessly offend.)

Third, he is a man of forgiveness and compassion. He says, *"not that I had any charge to bring against my own people".* Despite the great abuse Paul received, he says that he has "nothing against" his people's leaders. Though he does not mince words (see his application of the prophecy of Isaiah 6 to his listeners in vv.26-27!), yet he clearly must love his people. (See Romans 9:2-3)

Fourth, he's a man of incredible relentlessness. Again and again he has seen that his preaching to Jews divides them and brings many to persecute him. Yet

he does so again and the same thing happens (v.24-25). Why does Paul keep it up? Because of the three traits named above — his consistency, his integrity, and his compassion. If we are not patient and long-suffering with people, it is because we lack one or more of these.

3. 28:30-31. Why does Luke leave us hanging like this? Does this seem like an appropriate ending to the book? Why or why not?

Many have complained that the ending of Acts is anti-climactic. All we are told is that Paul was under house arrest and for two years was able to freely conduct a personal ministry of evangelism and discipleship. But why end there? And why tell us that he did it for two years — what happened then? We are never told if Paul meets the Emperor face to face (who was Nero), and we are not given any description of that dramatic encounter. Why not end with it?

However, the *"two years"* statement might be more significant than it looks. Some commentators point out that, since two years was the normal statutory period within which a prosecution could state its case, that Luke is telling us that no one ever appeared to bring a charge against Paul before Caesar. This is very likely what happened. *"Roman law was apt to deal hardly with unsuccessful prosecutors, especially if their charges appeared under examination to be merely vexatious."* (F. F. Bruce, p.535). It is difficult to imagine that the Sanhedrin wanted to travel to Rome to lodge charges before Caesar that they had not been able to substantiate before Claudius Lysias, Felix, or Festus. Most probably, the leaders of Jerusalem did not think it wise or practical to try to pursue Paul farther, and finally Paul was released by default of his accusers.

Also, the statement *"boldly and without hindrance"* is more significant than it looks. It means that there in the capital, the leading proponent of the Christian gospel was able to minister with the full awareness of Roman authority, under whose eye Paul worked. It really is a climax. Through great suffering yet through the help of God, the gospel arrived in the heart of the empire and took deep roots.

We are left with a final question — did Paul ever share the gospel with Caesar? Even if the Sanhedrin never sent a prosecutor, the Emperor could have had a hearing, as did Festus and Agrippa. Did he? It is hard to know, because there is a good argument to be made on both sides. On the positive side, we have Jesus's promise to Paul that *"you will stand before Caesar"* (27:24). On the other side, we know that Nero in his early reign very seldom personally heard court cases, but usually delegated them and confirmed them afterward. Since Luke's mention of "two years" signals that there was never formal charges brought, why would Nero have heard Paul. And if he had, why would Luke leave it out?

On balance, I think Stott is right. If Jesus' assurance that he would reach Rome came true, why not his assurance that he would stand before Caesar. So Paul shared the gospel with Nero — something that would never have happened if not for his sufferings.

Note: Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus are also written from prison in Rome, as are Phillipians, Colossians, and Ephesians. But statements in Timothy and Titus about Paul's journeys do not square with anything we know about Paul from the book of Acts. Therefore, we believe that Paul was released after the first imprisonment (during which he wrote Ephesians, *et al*), and probably travelled for at least a couple of years before being imprisoned and tried again, and executed in 64 AD under the first great persecution of Christians by Nero.

4. **Try to put the theme or message of the book of Acts into one sentence.**

5. **Looking back over the book, what major lessons stick out to you? What verses or incidents were the most personally significant for you? Why?**

Participants Guide for Leaders reference

Acts

Preparing the understanding for mission

Study 1 | Acts 1:1-8

1. **Read Luke 1:1-4. How do these world help assure us of the historical accuracy of the events of the book of Acts (and the gospel of Luke)?**

2. **1:1. What does v.1 tell us about Luke's theme or subject for the Book of Acts? How does this theme contrast Christianity from other faiths?**

3. **1:3-8. Why do you think Jesus prepares the apostles' minds (v.3) before he sends them power (v.4)? What was it about (cf. Luke 24:44-49)? What does the apostles' question reveal about their understanding of the kingdom? How does Jesus correct and inform their understanding?**

4. **1:2-8. What things are given to the apostles uniquely and what things are given to the us along with the apostles?**

5. **In what way is the apostolic ministry continuing in the church and in what way is it not? In what ways does this distinction influence the way we apply the book of Acts to ourselves today?**

WEEK 1 PROJECT — DISCUSSION

[Leaders should lead the group through this overview of the whole course and allow them to ask questions. Then use the discussion questions at the end for sharing.]

The purpose of this course is to prepare your mind and heart to be effective witnesses for Christ's kingdom in the world — in a small group community. The basis for this course is a study of the book of Acts, which is a source for all the principles we need to be witnesses.

In Acts 1 and 2 we see that Jesus prepared both the understandings and the whole lives of his disciples before he sent them out. He gave them both truth and power. But notice that this preparation came in the context of community. They did not learn and grow into "sentness" as individuals. They received both the necessary truth and power in community. Your small group community will be the setting for you to prepare yourselves for the same great experience and service.

As we study Acts 1 and 2, we will learn how to prepare one's life for God to use. As we study Acts 3-7 we will learn how to grasp and share the gospel itself. As we study Acts 8-12 we will learn how people come to Christ and are changed through conversion. As we look at Acts 13-17 we will learn how to answer objections and how to make a case for the truth of Christianity. Finally, in Acts 18-19 we will learn about different strategies and means for sharing our faith with others. When you get to this point (in March), your group will choose a way of outreach to do together, and you will spend 2-3 months putting your learning into practice, and then supporting and supervising one another as you reach out.

The following is an outline and schedule.

October		**Preparing your Life for evangelism**
Week	*Oct 7*	Acts 1:1-8: Preparing the Understanding for Mission *(Intro to Course)*
	Oct 14	Acts 1:6-26: Preparing the Life for Mission (*Building a "Altar" for a Life God Can Use)*
	Oct 21	Acts 2:1-36: The Power Arrives (*The Power of the Holy Spirit)*
	Oct 28	Acts 2:37-47: The New Community (The Power of the Gospel)

notes

November **Presenting the Gospel**

Week *Nov 4* Acts 3:1-26: Peter Presents the Gospel
(*Sharing a Testimony)*

Nov 11 Acts 4:1-31: Peter Defends the Gospel
(*A Gospel Outline)*

Nov 18 Acts 4:32-6:7: Counter-Attack
(*Gaining Confidence)*

Nov 25 Acts 6:8-7:60: Stephen Presents the Gospel
(*"Oikos" Evangelism)*

December **Leading People to Faith**

Week *Dec 2* Acts 8:1-40: The Ethiopian's Conversion
(*Special Joint Meeting: Joyful Boldness)*

Dec 9 Acts 9:1-43: Paul's Conversion
(*A Gospel Outline: II)*

Dec 16 Acts 10:1-11:18: Cornelius' Conversion
(*Understanding Conversion)*

Jan-Feb **Persuading People to Believe**

Week *Jan 6* Acts 11:19-12:24: New Mission Breakthrough
(*What is Apologetics?)*

Jan 13 Acts 12:25-13:52: Paul Presents the Gospel
(*Soundbyte Apologetics)*

Jan 20 Acts 14:1-28: The Gospel for Pagans
(*A Case for Christianity: I)*

Jan 27 Acts 15:1-16:5: Clarifying the Gospel
(*A Case for Christianity: II)*

Feb 3 Acts 16:5-40: Three Surprising Conversions
(*Process Apologetics)*

Feb 10 Acts 17:1-34: The Gospel for Intellectuals
(*Helps and Hints for Handling Objections)*

Feb-March **Learning Strategies for Outreach**

Week *Feb 17* Acts 18:1-28: Mission to Corinth
(*Special Joint Meeting: Home Outreach Buffets)*

Feb 24 Acts 19:1-22: Mission to Ephesus: I
(*Strategy 2: Discovering Series)*

Mar 3 Acts 19:23-41: Mission to Ephesus: II
(*Strategy3-4: Open Group. Oikos Intentional.)*

Mar 10 Acts 17-19: Review: Paul's Strategies
(*Strategy 5-6: Worship/Events. Service Projects.)*

March-May **Choosing Strategies and Reaching Out**
Remember, your group will choose a strategy together. Nothing will be forced upon you. Whether you are "outgoing" or shy — there is a method that fits you.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Share either one positive experience or one negative experience you've had in witnessing to your faith. What one or two important things can be learned about sharing faith from these incidents.**

2. **Share the two biggest obstacles for you with regards to witness.**

Acts
Preparing the life for mission

Study 2 | Acts 1:8-2:12

1. **1:9. Why do the angels tell the disciples not to "stand… looking into the sky"? What should the ascension mean to them and us?**

2. **Jesus told them to not begin their mission until they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (1:4-5). What do they do to prepare for this gift in 1:13-14?**

3. **What do they do to prepare for this gift in 1:15-26?**

4. **Compare and contrast this incident in Acts 2:1-4 with Acts 4:31; 7:55; 13:9; Luke 1:41, 67; 3:21-22; 4:1. In what ways is Pentacost unique, and in what ways is it repeatable?**

5. **What is the significance of the multi-lingual proclamation of the gospel on the day of Pentacost? Why do you think God did it that way?**

Acts
The power arrives

Study 3 | Acts 2:5-39

1. **vv.5-13 What evidence is there that this was a worship service that the crowd came to? What is the significance of that fact for us today?**

2. **vv.5-11. What are the marks of the kind of corporate worship that makes a strong evangelistic impact? vv.12-13. What kind of impact did this first corporate celebration have on the audience?**

3. **vv.14-36. What does Peter say in response to this first question? This is a gospel presentation — outline its basic points. What kind of impact does this first gospel presentation have on the audience?**

4. **vv.37-40. What does Peter say in response to this second question? This is a description of how to receive Christ — outline its basic points. What kind of impact does this have on the audience?**

5. **What do we learn from this passage about the witness you should have as an individual Christian? The witness we should have as a church?**

WEEK 3 PROJECT —

THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Introduction: The Holy Spirit's Coming

Before His death, Jesus told all those who were *spiritually* thirsty to come to Him and drink. He promised that rivers of living waters would flow out of them, speaking symbolically of the Holy Spirit who hadn't been given, because Jesus had not yet been glorified (John 7:37-39). Jesus later said it was for our good that He was going away and He promised to send *the Counselor, the Spirit of truth,* to guide us into all truth and to tell us what is yet to come (John 16:7,13). Then, Christ's last words before His ascension assured believers that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came, that would result in their being bold witnesses of His death and resurrection (Acts 1:8). Pentecost was fifty days after Christ was resurrected and just 10 days after His ascension. It is here, in Acts 2:1-36, that we see Jesus' promises about the Holy Spirit fulfilled. On that day all the Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter was empowered to explain what was happening. He describes David's prediction of Christ's resurrection and exaltation as fulfillment of prophecy and God's foreordained plan. And he points to the gift of the Holy Spirit as proof of Christ's Lordship.

Today we have the gospels, the book of Acts and the epistles to teach us about the Holy Spirit's ministry in our lives and in the life of Christ's church. We are inseparably linked to this *Person* as believers, yet many believers are confused about or ignorant of His ministry in our lives. Ask yourself — "Theoretically, if the Holy Spirit left my life today, would it make any difference in the way I respond to things?" (Leader: 10 min. #I; 10 min. #IIA; 10 min. #IIB; 15 min.for prayer.

I. The Holy Spirit's Ministry

A. The Holy Spirit came to *convict the world* of sin, righteousness and judgment, according to John 16:8-11. What has been *the world's response,* from Old Testament times until now, according to **Acts 7:51-53**?

B. Assign these verses. Discuss how the Holy Spirit relate to *all believers.*

1. **I Corin. 6:19, 20**
2. **Eph. 1:13**
3. **Rom. 8: 11, 16 & 26**

4. In I Corin. 12:7-13 we see that there is both diversity and unity in the body of Christ, for the common good. Everyone profits as the spiritual gifts are exercized that the Holy Spirit bestowed. He gives 'severally, as He wills, we receive.

C. Once we better understand the theology of God's Spirit at work in the church and in us, what should be the implications in our walk with God and the life of the church?

II. How Christians relate to the Holy Spirit

A. What potential *problems* are exposed in the following verses?

1. **Eph. 4:30** (What *solutions* are offered in v.31,32?)

2. **I Thes. 5:19** (What *solutions* are offered in verses 20-24?)

3. **Gal. 5:17** (What *solutions* are offered in verses 16,18 & 25?)

4. I John 1:5-10 once again shows us problems, or *hindrances*, that can keep us from the Spirit's fullness. How can these verses help us follow through on obeying the solutions offered in the verses above *and what's at stake if we don't?*

B. Eph. 5:18 is a command for believers to be filled with the Holy Spirit. **It's not an option,** but He doesn't tell us to do something beyond our grasp. Eph. 5:19-21 and Col. 3:15,16 describe evidences of the Spirit's fullness in our hearts and in the church. We speak to one another with songs, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music in our hearts to the Lord, being thankful for everything and submitting ourselves one to another. Do you see the Spirit's fullness being manifested in our church?

III. Pray together about:

A. Where you need deeper understanding, confessing obstacles to obedience in your walk and your desire to experience the Spirit's work in yourself and in our church.

B. **ALTAR Accountability.** In the whole group, or in smaller groups of 2 or 3, share how you are doing in the 3-5 things that you resolved to do in order to 'build an altar' and have a life more useful to God'.

Acts
The new community

Study 4 | Acts 2:40-47

1. **vv.40-41. Why do you think Peter tells them to save themselves from "this generation"? What does this statement imply about the church, and about becoming a Christian?**

2. **vv.42-47. Make a list of the characteristics and functions of the early church which are evident in this passage.**

3. **What do we learn here about the church's a) ministry of learning and b) ministry of fellowship?**

4. **What do we learn here about the church's a) ministry of worship and b) ministry of witness and service?**

The five ministries of the early church are also five "vital signs" of a Spirit-filled community.

A. Ministry of learning in the truth.	**(1st sign: Theological depth)**
B. Ministry of loving in the fellowship.	**(2nd sign: Intimate relationships)**
C. Ministry of worship in the Spirit.	**(3rd sign: Joyous worship)**
D. Ministry of witness though words.	**(4th sign: Relentless evangelism)**
E. Ministry of service through deeds.	**(5th sign: Sacrificial service)**

5. **Consider your own small group. How can it better manifest these 'vital signs'? Consider your local church. How can it better manifest these 'vital signs'?**

WEEK 4 PROJECT —

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Introduction

In Acts 2:37, we see an example of the Spirit convicting the world of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8-11) as Peter spoke to the crowd at Pentecost. He was preaching the gospel boldly. We can too. (Leader: Look up each verse under I - 10 minutes, II - 15 minutes, III -10 minutes and discuss the questions. Pace yourself to leave 10 to 15 minutes to read number IV and pray.)

I. Understanding where the power lies

A. **Romans 1:16** – What are we told about the gospel? How does this verse challengeour attitude about witnessing and to whom we witness?

B. **I Corin. 1:17,18 & 22-24** – What was Paul's central message to the Greeks at Corinth, in spite of their intellects, morals and philosophies?

C. **I Corin. 2:1-5** – How did Paul proclaim the gospel that he said he was not ashamed of and what comfort does this offer to us?

II. Accepting the ministry God gave us.

A. II Corin. 5:17-20 – What is God's messenger called? What specifically does he do? Where does he get his authority? What does God's messenger talk about? What's the message? How would you define *'reconcile'?* In this passage, who is reaching out to whom?

B. Who have you had an opportunity to share this message with lately and how did they respond?

III. Because of the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of the gospel, the lives of many people were touched. We should be able to experience increasing confidence in communicating the gospel, as we continue to contemplate what it means to build an altar, make sacrifices to the Lord, and trust the Holy Spirit to let the fire fall into our hearts as we live for Him in word and deed.

A. **PRAY FOR OPPORTUNITIES this week** to practice being a minister of reconciliation. It is the God empowered ministry that has been given to each believer! Accept it joyfully.

B. **ALTAR Accountability.** During closing time of sharing and prayer — in the larger group, or in smaller groups of 2 or 3, ask each other and share: "How are you doing with the 3-5 things that you resolved to do in order to "build and altar" and have a life more useful to God?"

Acts

Peter presents the Gospel

Study 5 | Acts 3:1-26

1. **What is striking about the healing of the crippled man? What does it tell us about how God works in our lives?**

2. **What essential facts does Peter tell them about Jesus? What three kinds of evidence does he give for these facts (apart from his citation of Scripture)?**

3. **How does Peter prove from the Bible that Jesus is the Messiah? Where did Peter learn all this? What is the importance of seeing the centrality of Christ in the Old Testament?**

4. **a)How does Peter tell his listeners they must do to receive Christ? Compare it with what he told his listeners in Acts 2. b) What does he say will be the results of receiving Christ?**

5. **Summarize what can we learn about evangelism and witness from Peter.**

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WEEK 5 PROJECT — SHARING A TESTIMONY

I. The Story of **your spiritual journey.** Have you experienced salvation? If so, you have a message. **Read I Peter 3:15.** Let's consider what we need to know to be ready:

A. Write *one word* best describing **your life** during each of the three phases of your spiritual journey to knowing Christ. Then, share them, by category, without comment.

1)Before_____

2)How_____

3)After_____

B. Record *3 phrases or words* that describe different attitudes, circumstances or actions you had before you came to know Christ, then share them.

1) 2) 3)

C. How would you summarize your differences and what you had in common?

II. The story of **Jesus Christ's spiritual journey. Read Romans 10:14-17**

A. **How** did you hear the gospel (who, where, when)? Consider finding a way this week to thank that person for influencing you to give your life to Christ. It might encourage them!

B. **What** did you understood about the claims of Jesus Christ? *This is the part of your testimony that must be clear and about HIM, not you!*

III. Proclaiming His praises! **Read Isaiah 52:7.** " In biblical times, there was no CNN to take people into the battle zone via television. Instead, messengers ran from the war zones to inform anxious family members and friends of the outcome of the battles. In this passage the message is one of **victory, "Your God reigns!"** (*The Treasures of Encouragement* Sharon Betters)

A. Ps.66:16 says, **"Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell youwhat He has done for me."**

1. What is an area where you have seen **change in your life** because of Jesus? A true testimony relates to personal experience.

2. How has God **comforted** you through relational conflict, deep loss, illness, financial or job pressures? You have a message!

notes

B. This is how we can preach without 'preaching'! We can cultivate the habit of seeing ALL of life as an opportunity to express gratitude to God! No child of God is exempt from this type of 'preaching' ministry'.

IV. **Read Jer. 20:9. Pray** for our testimonies to **burst forth from an inward fire!** We ARE to **preach the gospel, without 'preaching' and talk about Jesus!** An energizing power is given by the Holy Spirit to cleansed, trusting hearts. So confess your sins for continual cleansing and consider this quote by Michael Green: **'EVANGELISM IS <u>OVERFLOW</u>'!**

Acts

Peter defends the Gospel

Study 6 | Acts 4:1-31

1. **What do we learn about unbelief from the reaction of the Sadducees, rulers, elders, and teachers of the law in contrast to the reaction of the people?**

2. **What is particularly troubling to the leaders about the apostles (v.7, 13-14), and what link is there between this distress and their rejection of the gospel message?**

3. **vv.8-12. What evidence and arguments are used by Peter in his defense? What is the leaders' response?**

4. **vv.23-31. What are the marks the prayer which brings down such power into the disciples?**

5. **Summarize. What do we learn about witness and ministry from this entire passage? Examine your hearts and our church in light of it.**

WEEK 6 PROJECT —

THE CONTENT OF THE GOSPEL: PART 1

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you

"?" -for something that raised a question

If a Christian is going to share the faith, it is necessary to have in your head both an outline of the gospel and a summary of the gospel.

In The Content of the Gospel: Part II (before Christmas) we will provide a single outline that can be memorized. Today, we discuss the need for a "gospel summary".

WHAT — is an outline of the gospel and a summary of the gospel?

An outline of the gospel is a framework on which you can hang all the relevant information about Christ so that a listener can believe and receive him. A gospel outline is an "accordion" in that it can be shared fairly briefly, but could also be expanded very fully, depending on the circumstances.

1. The "two diagnostic" questions of Evangelism Explosion, (see D.James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion*)
2. The "Four Spiritual Laws" of Campus Crusade, (see numerous Crusade publications)
3. The "Bridge Illustration" of Navigators, (see in Hybels, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*)
4. See a less well-known but fine presentation by John Guest called "A Faith That Can Be Yours", (*in Risking Faith*)

A summary of the gospel really needs to be brief — it should 30 seconds to a minute in length at the most. It is much shorter than the full presentation that needs to be given to someone who is very ready to believe.

WHEN — use a gospel summary or outline?

An outline of the gospel should be used when a listener is genuinely interested in knowing what the Christian faith is about, and how to become a Christian. A

summary of the gospel is not sufficient for a person who wants to become a Christian. Rather, it is for the early stages of a conversation or a relationship with a non-Christian. Its purpose is to get the *basic* idea of the gospel out on the table. Mainly, it is to distinguish Christianity from mere "religion and morality", and to give a gripping definition of sin and grace.

The goal of the brief summary is to get the non-Chrisitian to reveal his or her particular problems with the gospel, the personal barriers against faith. Then, these barriers can be worked through. After they have been, you can provide a gospel outline that more fully explains the faith. The reason we provide a "brief" summary of the gospel is so that, eventually, your sharing of the faith will be very directed at the person's particular and specific issues. If you provide first a longer outline of the gospel, you probably will be "scratching where the person is not itching" and thus (perhaps) you may bore them.

HOW — to use a gospel summary.

Here are several examples. You may prefer to write your own.

Do-Done summary (see example in Bill Hybels, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*).

"Do". *All forms of religion, (formal or informal), are spelled D-O, because they tell us we have to perform good works and obey moral and religious laws in order to find God, to achieve forgiveness, nirvana, or peace. But you can never be sure you have done enough. "Done". But Christianity is spelled D-O-N-E because God sent his son to earth to live the life we should live, and die on the cross to pay the debt we should pay for wrongs we've done. Buddha said "Strive w/out ceasing"; Jesus said "It is finished". (John 19:30)*

To become a Christian is to turn from "do" to "done" by asking God to accept you for Jesus' sake and commit to live for him.

Sin-Salvation summary (based on a paragraph in John Stott's *The Cross of Christ*):

Sin is us substituting ourselves for God, putting ourselves where only God deserves to be — in charge of our lives.

Salvation is God substituting himself for us, putting himself where only we deserve to be — dying on the cross. Read II Cor.5:21.

notes

PETER DEFENDS THE GOSPEL

To become a Christian is first to admit the ***problem:*** *that you have been substituting yourself for God either by religion (trying to be your own savior by obedience to moral standards) or by irreligion (trying to be your own lord by disobedience to moral standards). And second to accept the* ***solution:*** *asking God to accept you for Jesus' sake and know that you are loved and accepted because of his record, not yours.*

Slavery-Freedom summary (see *What Does It Mean To Know God?*)

Slavery. *We were built to live for God supremely, but instead we live for love, work, achievement or morality to give us meaning and worth.* Thus every person, religious or un- is worshipping something to get your worth. *But these things enslave us with guilt (if we fail to attain them) or anger (if someone blocks them from us) or fear (if they are threatened) or drivenness (since we must have them).* Sin is worshipping anything but Jesus — and the wages of sin is slavery. **Freedom.** *As a fish is only free in water, we are only free when serving Jesus supremely. For he is the only source of meaning that we cannot lose (freeing us from fear and anger) and that is a free gift (freeing us from guilt and drivenness).* Read Matt.11:28-30. *His "yoke" is the only one that does not enslave.*

Law-Love summary.

Law. *Some see God as simply Judge who demands we be moral and righteous. If God is not a Judge there is no hope for the world — how else will wrong be punished?*

Love. *Some see God as simply a Father who loves us and doesn't want to punish. If God is not a Father there is no hope for us — how else can we be forgiven?*

Problem. *God is both. If a father was also a judge, and a guilty child was brought before him, he could not just acquit. How can God's Law and Love must be reconciled?*

Solution. *When God sent his Son to die in our place, the judge was judged. On the cross God's justice and his love was satisfied at once, "that God might be both just and justifier [judge and father] of those who believe" (Rom.3:26).*

notes

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Discuss those things in the reading that most helped you — things you marked with an '!'**

2. **Discuss those things in the reading that raised questions — things you marked with an '?'**

3. **Which gospel summary is the most helpful to you? Why?**

4. **Do you have a summary that you have heard or that you use that is not represented here? Share it.**

Acts
Counter-attack

Study 7 | Acts 4:32-6:7

1. **4:32-37. How does v.31 lead to v.32? In what ways does the filling of the Holy Spirit and boldness (v.31) relate to the radical sharing of material possessions?**

2. **4:32-33 and 6:6-7. How do we see word-witness relate to deed-witness in the life of the early church? What implications does this have for your own witness here and now?**

3. **5:1-12. What was the sin of Ananias and Sappphira? Why was it so serious and so seriously dealt with? How can we a) fall into a similar trap, and b) avoid it?**

4. **5:12-42. Survey this long passage and make a list of the characteristics of a spiritually vital church.**

5. **6:1-6. What does this passage teach us about the marks of a vital church?**

WEEK 7 PROJECT — GAINING CONFIDENCE

Ice Breaker: What is the key ingredient in gaining confidence in lifestyle evangelism?

I. **Let's review** what we've learned through our study in Acts and our projects that should help us develop confidence in being our King's representatives:

A. The Power of the Holy Spirit – Read Romans 8:6 & 11

1. What are several examples we've seen in Acts that have demonstrated "the power of the Holy Spirit" being unleashed in ordinary men?

2. What would keep you from experiencing this confidence? How can we get the truths about the Holy Spirit in Scripture to help us gain confidence seeking to represent Christ to others in both word and deed?

B. The Power of the Gospel – Read I Corin. 1:17,18

1. What are several examples of the Gospel's power we've seen in Acts?

2. What would keep us from taking steps to witness if we believe A & B? How can we get these truths to motivate us into action?

C. Sharing a Testimony – We shared with one another words, phrases and sentences describing our spiritual journeys to faith in Jesus Christ, using the simple outline of **before, how & after.** Has anyone done this lately? (1 or 2 share)

D. The Content of the Gospel

1. What example of *an outline* of the Gospel have we seen in our Acts study? Have you shared an outline of the Gospel lately? (1 or 2 share)

2. *A summary* of the Gospel is for the early stages of conversion, giving the basic idea of the gospel, defining sin and grace, and exposing faith barriers. Have you tried using one of the examples? (1 or 2 share)

II. Gaining confidence in lifestyle evangelism will come with <u>practice</u>. As you are a "doer of the Word and not a hearer only," you will find yourself gaining confidence. Obedience to the light you've been given on a subject will always result in strengthened faith and confidence in God working *through you* with the Holy Spirit's power.

notes

A. Pray for an opportunity to share your testimony (or part of it), an outline of the Gospel (using a booklet or the Scriptures), or a summary of the Gospel (like: Do-Done, Sin-Salvation, Slavery-Freedom, Law-Love, Problem-Solution).

B. Take the initiative to do this. The Spirit empowers obedience. *Expect* God to answer your prayer and honor your obedience and the desire to see others know Christ. The fire will fall on the altar of a pure, obedient, faith-filled, praying heart!

Acts

Stephen presents the Gospel

Study 8 | Acts 6:7 - 7:60

1. **6:8-15. What does this passage tell us about why Stephen's ministry was so effective? Which of his characteristics do you lack? What can you do to grow in that area?**

2. **6:13-14. Summarize Stephen's message from his accusers. How does the gospel change the way we look at the temple and the law? Why is it significant that the future apostle Paul listened to this Stephanic gospel presentation (8:1)?**

3. **7:1-50. How does Stephen's very long speech answer the original question (v.1)? How does each section about Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Solomon advance his basic argument? How does he adapt his argument to the premises and nature of his audience?**

4. **7:37-43. How do these verses address the place of the law in Israel? 7:51-53 How does this charge follow from his whole speech?**

5. **7:54-8:1. What happens to Stephen to prepare him for death so well? Why does it lead to courage and forgiveness (v.60)? How can we know more of this ourselves?**

WEEK 8 PROJECT — "OIKOS" EVANGELISM: I

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

The Main Method of Evangelism
In the book of Acts, especially in the chapters 10 and following, the "main method" of evangelism of the early church emerges. It is not a program or a well-oiled scheme — it is what we will call *"oikos evangelism"*.

"Oikos" is the Greek word for "household", but we must be careful not to read into this term our own concept of the nuclear family. A Graeco-Roman household contained not only several generations of the same family, but also included servants, the families of servants, friends, and even business associates. Essentially, new believers shared their faith with other members of their "oikos", and thus people came to faith through web networks of relationships.

Not only church history, but modern research has shown that the vast majority of persons come to faith through the witness of a friend, relative, or associate — not through massive programs or campaigns.

Biblical examples
"The following day [Peter] arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him…"
Acts 10:24

"On the Sabbath, we went outside the city gate to the river… We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira… The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come stay at my house'."
Acts 16:13-15

"He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and all your household.' Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized."
Acts 16:30-34

"The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, 'We

have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ)… Philip found Nathanael and told him, 'We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote - Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."
John 1:41,45
"As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collect's booth. 'Follow me', Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him."
Mark 2:14,15

Principles
1. Definition. In Manhattan, there are not so many *oikos's* which consist of large extended families. Nonetheless, everyone has an "oikos". Notice that Levi (Matthew) the tax collector had a household that consisted mainly of business associates rather than relatives.

An "oikos" is a web of common kinship affinity (relatives), geographical affinity (neighbors), vocational affinity (co-workers), associational affinities (special interest colleagues), and plain friends.

2. Advantages."Oikos" evangelism is the most personally demanding of all the methods of evangelism, because it requires primarily that you be a changed person, transformed by the gospel. Your life is the main attractor and the main evidence for the truth of the faith. In "oikos" evangelism, your life is under observation by those who don't believe. You can't run and you can't hide! If your character is flawed (or even unexceptional), you won't be effective.

"Oikos" evangelism is therefore very non-manipulative. The person outside the faith is, in a sense, "in the driver's seat". He or she gets to raise questions and determines at what speed the process procedes. There is no "canned" presentation. He or she also has a personal knowledge of the evangelist, and thus gets a very good and fair view of what Christianity is all about and how it works in someone's life.

In short, all the "advantages" of oikos evangelism are for the unbeliever, not the believer. No wonder it is so effective!

3. Pre-requisites. Essentially, the pre-requisite is that the gospel change us. Until that happens, we will be ineffective witnesses. First the joyful effects of the gospel in our own lives must give us an enormous energy for witness. How can we keep our mouths closed about such a wonder? If that energy is not there, we must repent and seek God until it flows. But second, the humbling nature of the gospel must lead us to approach non-believers without superiority and with lots of respect. Since we are saved only by God's grace and not our goodness, we expect to often find wisdom and compassion in non-Christians which at many points may exceed ours. Is that humility and respect there? If

not, we will be ineffective. Third, the love experience of the gospel must remove from us the fear of others' disapproval. Is this boldness increasing? If not, we must repent and reflect on the gospel and God's acceptance with us until this fear diminishes.

These three character qualities are absolutely necessary. Put another way, if you are not effective in reaching others for Christ, it is because of a lack of joy, a lack of humility and gentleness, or a lack of boldness. Which is it?

If the gospel fills us with joy, humility, and confidence, then we will not treat non-Christians as "evangelism cases" — people that we relate to, talk to, and care for only in order to win them over to our side. That is to objectify and dehumanize them, and, ironically, it is unwinsome. We should not love people in order to evangelize them. Rather, we should evangelize them in order to love them. The more these dynamics are present in our lives the more we will draw in new people like a magnet (Acts 2:47).

4. Planning. In this week's project, we will only talk about the first step in an "oikos" evangelism plan — choosing 4 people to begin to pray for. Make a list of 4 people that fit these qualifications: a) We hit it off well together. b) We share some common interests. c) This person would probably enjoy our church or small group. d) This person is open to me.

Make the list:

Now begin praying for them, and begin thinking of ways to strengthen your relationship with them.

notes

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What most helped you in the reading? What questions did it raise?**

2. **Which of the three pre-requisites for witness do you most need? How did Stephen show all three in his life (Acts 6:8-15; 7:54ff)?**

3. **Share your list of 4 people with someone in the group and pray for the other person's "oikos" by name as well as your own.**

The ministry of Philip

Study 9 | Acts 8:1-40

1. **8:1-4. What are the results of the execution of Stephen and the persecution that it brought? (Have you seen God work good things through a disaster?) How does this result fit in with Stephen's message?**

2. **8:1-4. Who is doing the preaching of the word in these verses and what is the significance of that?**

3. **8:5-25. What was so amazing about Philip's act of going to Samaria? What were the elements in his effective ministry? What would be the equivalent of his bold ministry action today?**

4. **8:9-25. Did Simon really believe (cf.v.13 with v.21-23)? What was Simon's main problem? How can we avoid his mistake? Do you think he repented?**

5. **8:14-17. This is a highly unusual and puzzling passage, and people have been debating it for years. Let's be guided by this note from John Stott.**

6. **8:26-40. What do we learn about sharing our faith from the story of the Ethiopian' conversion?**

CONVERSION PROJECT

Read and mark "!" - for something that helped you

"?" -for something that raised a question

> Christianity without conversion is no longer Christianity, because conversion means turning to God. It involves forsaking sin, with its self-deifying attitudes and self-serving conduct, and turning to Christ, whose death on the cross is the basis for God's offer of mercy and forgiveness. Jesus was judged in our place so God could extend his righteousness to us.
>
> – David Wells, *Turning to God*, p.27

In most translations of the Bible, the word "conversion" appears very seldom. But that does not mean that conversion is not absolutely central to Christianity. Rather, the New Testament writers use many different words to describe the process.

The Book of Acts records the conversion of Paul three times (9:5ff., 22:6ff., 26:12ff.). In addition, it tells us of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:25ff.), of Cornelius, (10:44ff.), and of the Philippian jailer (16:29ff.). But moreover, it records Paul telling us that all the Gentiles who were entering the church were entering by *"conversion"* (Acts 15:3). Thus the book of Acts shows the indispensibility of conversion to being a Christian.

But what *is* conversion? In is common to use terms like "converted" "born again" "believed" "received Christ" all interchangeably. But the Bible makes some important distinctions.

To "become a Christian" is both "Conversion" and "Regeneration". They are two sides of the same coin, and cannot be separated, yet they must be distinguished. One is something God does and one is something we do. The first is the theological, the other is behavioral. The theological element (what we are in Christ — regeneration) is the same for all, but the behavioral (what we do — turning) is the different for all. Regeneration is an act of God at a single and specific point in time (though we may not be conscious of exactly when that point has occurred). Turning is a process of ours, which may be dramatic or gradual, depending on many factors.

An "insider" to Christianity (i.e. a child raised in a Christian home) may find conversion so natural that he or she cannot pinpoint the time of the change at all. (Some churches create venues for children to "give their lives to Christ", to help them pinpoint their conversions. But usually the process is extremely gradual. There may be several preparatory steps in which God "illuminates" the youth through the Holy Spirit, providing pieces of the gospel, until it "comes together" for them after a number of years. On the other hand, an "outsider" to Christianity (i.e. a person raised Jewish or Muslim or secular) may have much more of a "Damascus Road" (i.e. Pauline) conversion experience. So the theological side of conversion is always identical — regeneration. But the behavioral side of conversion is always different, depending on culture, personality, and prior world-view.

A. Regeneration
This is a work of God in which the power and holiness of God enters our hearts in the form of the Holy Spirit. This is so radical a reality that it is called "partaking of the divine nature" (II Peter 1:4), becoming a whole new creation (II Cor.5:17; Gal.6:15), being born again (John 3:3). In Titus, Paul says, *"he saved us… not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life."* (Titus 3:5-7). What the Holy Spirit does is called "regeneration" (*paliggenesias*), which is the same word as "rebirth" (*gennetha anothen* — "born from above"). We have a new "genesis", we are born again. See also I John 2:29, 3:9-10; I Peter 1:3,2, 2:2; James 1:18).

B. Conversion
The New Testament uses the word *epistrepho,* to "turn" as the word for conversion. Almost always, the word is used as an intransitive verb — it is what we do. (On the other hand, "regeneration" or "rebirth" is what is done to us.) Just as we cannot enter the kingdom of God without being born again (John 3:3), we also cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we convert (Matt.18:3). Everyone must convert, whether Jew (Acts 3:19; 9:35) or Gentile (Acts 11:21; 14:15).

Because the word for conversion is "turning", there are therefore two parts to conversion — turning away from and turning toward. Thus the Thessalonians turned from idols and turned to the living God (I Thess.1:9). These two aspects are *metanoia*, repentance (turning away) and *pistis*, faith (turning toward). We are only converted as we turn away from sin and self-salvation, and to faith in Christ and his salvation.

Summary:
Now we can see that, though it is fair and right to use the word "conversion" to refer to both rebirth and converting, and it is fair to use the word "reborn" to refer to both rebirth and converting, that they are two aspects of the same thing. John brings them together when he says: *To all who received him, who believed in his name* (conversion), *he gave full rights as children of God, who are born not of nature or of the will of man, but of the will of God* (rebirth). John 1:12-13. Rebirth/conversion is also called a change of ownership (Rom.6:17-18), a change from darkness to light (Acts 25:18; II Cor.4:6; I Pet. 2:9), a change from death to life (John 5:24; Eph.2:1-6).

So — we can outline "becoming a Christian" like this:

Rebirth (what God does)

Conversion (what we do)

Repent (turn from self-salvation and serving self)

Faith (turn to Christ salvation and serving him)

notes

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What helped you most?**

2. **What questions were raised?**

3. **How does this shed light on your own conversion experience?**

Acts

The conversion of Saul

Study 10 | Acts 9:1-31

1. **v.1-2. How do these verses shed light on John 6:44 and John 15:16? How is this an encouragement to us doing evangelism?**

2. **v.3-4. Compare this account of Jesus first words to a fuller account in Acts 26:13-14. What indication is there that Saul's conversion was not as "sudden" as it seems? What could these "goads" have been? What were the "goads" Jesus used on you?**

3. **vv.3-9. Some have said that Saul's conversion is a very strong piece of evidence for the supernatural origins of Christianity. How would that be so? (Compre 9:1-9 with Acts 22:3-16 and 26:9-18).**

4. **v.4-5. What is the significance of Jesus' statement that Saul is persecuting Him? (How is a convicting statement? How is it an encouraging statement?)**

5. **v.10-31. What are the results of Saul's conversion evident in these verses? In other words, what changes do we see?**

WEEK 10 PROJECT — JOYFUL BOLDNESS

Introduction: We tend to talk boldly about the things that bring us the greatest joy. Our job, a wedding, a child's birth, or something new. So it shouldn't surprise us that boldness in witnessing should follow a personal, intimate, joyful encounter with the living God.

I. Read John 1:35-42.

A. Why was Andrew *joyful?*

B. How did Andrew demonstrate his joy and *boldness?*

C. What resources do we have that Andrew didn't have that should foster joyful boldness in our witness to others?

D. How do we allow ourselves to be robbed of joyfulness or boldness?

II. The following verses describe the *spiritual boldness (confidence)* God wants us to experience in two other areas of our lives. What is the source of confidence in each situation… and what are the results?

A. Heb. 4:16 and 10:19; Eph. 3:12

B. I John 4:13-19

III. Ps. 35:9 says, "…my soul will rejoice in the Lord and delight in his salvation". But in Ps. 51:12 David pleaded, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation…" Which best describes where you are *experientially* right now with the Lord? Why?

IV. Suggested action points

A. **Remember your conversion.** Meditate on the things that brought joy to your heart when you first knew Jesus Christ personally. What were a few?

B. Acts 4:29 assures us we should **pray for boldness:** "Lord… enable your servant to speak your word with great boldness." Are you willing to pray that? Continue to pray for the four people you recorded in a recent project. Have you seen God at work in any of their lives yet?

C. **Believe** that God wants you to be joyful and bold in prayer, witnessing and on the day of judgment as you stand before Him, relying on the Father's Savior's and Spirit's love for you. **Conclude your discussion with prayer for one another… personal requests and also reflecting on what you've shared about joyful boldness in your lives. Don't miss it!**

Acts

The conversion of Cornelius

Study 11 | Acts 9:32 - 11:18

1. **9:32-42. Why do you think Luke includes these two miracles as an introduction to the longer account of Cornelius' conversion?**

2. **10:1-8, 22, 34-35. Cornelius is an example of a "good man" without the gospel. What do these verses teach us about such a person?**

3. **10:9-23. How does break down Peter's racial/cultural prejudices?**

4. **10:34-48. How does v.34-35 (and his presentation of the gospel) show that Peter understands now the meaning of the vision? What is the meaning of the vision?**

5. **10:44-11:18. What is the final (the fourth) sign given by God to Peter that the gospel is for the Gentiles? How do our converts teach us — ad Cornelius taught Peter?**

CONVERSION: PART II PROJECT

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

THE GOSPEL AND THE "SEEKER"

In I Corinthians 14:24 Paul describes a person who comes to a worship service *"who does not understand"* — literally a "seeker". We have seen Cornelius is a "seeker" who God acknowledges and sincere (Acts 10:1-4). Though they may be very good persons, they still need to be brought to *"repentance unto life"* (Acts 11:14). How can we help a person who is "on the verge" — who seems to want to come to Christ. Here are some helps on helping such persons:

Principles for applying the gospel to seekers

The following is a paraphrase of a lecture in an out of print book by a Presbyterian minister of the early 19th century. William Sprague, *Lectures on Revival*, Lecture 6

1. Determine the amount of knowledge and the amount of feeling.

- if he is long on feeling and short on knowledge, your course of action is fairly simple. He may be ripe for conversion. Present the truths of the gospel in a balanced, full way. You may be bold to press for a commitment. If he will not, discover at what point he has trouble. Review the outline briefly, asking, "Do you understand and agree that first,_____, and second,_____…"
- if he is long on knowledge and short on feeling, you may need to elaborate the gospel presentation with vivid illustrations and pointed applications.. Show him that Christianity is not an academic matter, not a matter of weaving a web of intricate thought-forms. Say, as Whitefield, *"It is one thing to assent with your mouth, and another thing to believe from the heart. If you have really done that, a truth affects you mind, will, and emotions. Have you ever been saddened by your sins? Have you cried out to God that you need a saviour? Has the mercy of God in Christ seemed precious to you?"* [Caution: Keep in mind the words of Thomas Watson — *"But wouldest thou know when thou hast been humbled enough for sin? When thou are willing to let go thy sins. The gold has lain long enough in the furnace when the dross is purged out; so, when the love of sin is purged out, a soul is humbled enough, what needs more? If a needle has let out the abscess, what needs a lance? Be no more cruel to thyself than God would have thee."*
  – from A Body of Divinity, p. 451

notes

2. **Impress on the awakened sinner the need to come to God on gospel terms immediately.**
   - God owns you. Every day you rule your own life you become more and more guilty.
   - The concern you have now is the gracious influence of the spirit of God. If you decide to come to God at your own convenience, you are mocking God. He is too great for you to snap your fingers when you are ready. Who is King around here? You are in great danger of losing the openness of heart you have now. Do you think you can repent any time you wish? No! Repentance is a gift from God, which he is offering you now. You must take it or risk becoming too hard to care. Then you will be lost forever. Don't delay. Even a passing conversation with a friend can drive away your convictions. Act now.

3. **Beware of a spirit of self-righteousness.**
   - When a man is first awakened to his need, he usually sets out on a furious effort to please God through his efforts (church attendance, prayer, obeying the law). Warn him of this.
   - Say, "Don't stop striving to please God, but do it in the spirit of the new covenant, not the covenant of works. There is no actual saving value in your strivings, only gratitude value (saying "thank you" for a full salvation). Until you accept this and fall down helpless at the feet of Christ's mercy and are willing to accept the free gift of eternal life, you cannot be saved."
   - Warn him that he can assent to justification by faith in the abstract and still try to catch God's eye with his efforts, so he must examine his heart.

4. **Beware of making comfort your ultimate end instead of giving God his due.**
   - If you see yourself as a sufferer looking for relief primarily, you will never find peace. God is no sugar daddy to be used by you to secure your own happiness. Say to him: "Blessed are they which hunger and thirst after — what? Blessedness? No! Righteousness! Happy are they which don't seek happiness, but rather to give God his due. Happiness never comes to those who seek it directly. You are a sinner, in need of pardon. Give God what you owe: repentance, faith, obedience. Your troubles will take care of themselves. Until you have grasped this in your heart, you'll not have peace."

5. **If, after sharing the gospel, the person is not ready to repent and believe, yet is still awakened, advise this:**
   - Spend a lot of time reading good books, the Bible, and in prayer. Coming to church meetings and so on is good, but no substitute. It is too easy to derive your spirituality from the environment. Also, many well-meaning counselors may be confusing. Talk often with one or two spiritual advisors and with the Lord
   - Read the intriguing sermon by Lloyd-Jones on Mark 8:22,26 — "Men as Trees, Walking" in *Spiritual Depression: Causes and Cures*. He tells about people who are in a similar condition to the blind man. They seemed to have been touched by Jesus — they see things they couldn't see before, yet things are still not in focus. What did the blind man do? He was honest. He did not say, "I see fine!" He admitted his condition and Jesus touched him again. So tell Jesus what you see and what you don't see. Ask him to touch you some more until you see clearly.
   - But above all, stress that these means of study and prayer are only means to the end. They cannot merit anything from God. They are only ways to enable God to work in you.

Common objections or problems posed by seekers

1. "I just can't believe" What you are describing is simply the settled distaste every natural heart has to God. Don't make an excuse for it. In yourself, you are unable to believe, but the Holy Spirit has already come to your aid. If you see what you have to do and wish that you could do it, then that is evidence of the Holy Spirit's work. (You give yourself too much credit! You couldn't see all these things unless the Spirit was already at work! Don't despair.) Now, as long as this divine aid is offered to you, you must act. Don't wait for some kind of psychological sense of certainty; faith is acting on what you know to be true.

Paul says: "We walk by faith, not by sight". See? He doesn't pit faith against reason, he pits faith against feelings and appearances. Do you see what you must do? Then repent, trust, obey Christ. How can you stand on this plea of inability? That is an abstract question, and it is a sinful refusal.

2. "I've tried all you've said to do, but it hasn't worked." [Evaluate: Either he hasn't 'tried' properly, or he has a false understanding of what 'worked' means.] What do you mean by 'worked'? Did you expect a certain feeling? Did you expect your problems to go away. Faith is acting on what you know to be true, despite how things feel or appear ("We walk by faith, not by sight".) Imagine that a doctor tells you, "You are dying because of all the fat and starch you are eating; if you stop eating steak and potatoes, your body will begin to strengthen". The first time someone beside you eats a big steak dinner, won't it smell great? It doesn't smell dangerous and deadly. Now if you exercise faith, you follow what you know to be true (this food is poison to me), or you can

follow your appetites, senses, and feelings. What if you exercise faith? Will it immediately feel wonderful? NO! Your stomach will growl and you will feel unsatisfied. It is only as you practice faith over time that the healing and health (that is, the good feeling and visible effects) will come. So it is with saving faith. You may not at first experience anything remarkable. Nor will all your problems be solved. But your standing with God is changed, and eventually, the effects will flow out into your whole life. Phil. 2:12-14 tells us that the strength and life of God comes as you obey him. He works as we work.

How have you been trying? Perhaps you have been striving in a spirit of self-righteousness (see above). Perhaps you have been striving in a spirit of bargaining with God, instead of approaching him as a sovereign king (see above). ("I'll do this and that if God will do this and that". Instead say, "I owe God everything, and he owes me nothing; I'll gladly do whatever he bids me WITHOUT CONDITIONS". If you have put conditions on your seeking him, he will not meet you.) [Bottom line.] I'm sorry you have been frustrated in your seeking God, and I cannot know your heart or God's heart enough to tell you why you haven't felt that you've connected with him. But I do know this. You haven't got the option of giving up. His disciples said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You [alone] have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). What is your alternative? You have none. If you keep seeking, Jesus says that no one who comes to him will he cast out (John 6:37). On the other hand, if you stop seeking him, you will certainly perish.

3. "I just don't have any sorrow for sin or desire for God." [He may be the victim of having heard long, lurid testimonies which convinced him that he too must have an extended period of self-loathing and weeping over his sin.] It is not Biblical to require everyone to have equally long, vivid, and horrible sorrow over sin. Look at Matthew, Zaccheus, the Phillipian jailer, and Lydia (Luke 19:9; Acts 16:14, etc.) There is no indication that they spent time in terror and horror. They were called abruptly and they came. Look at Jesus invitation to the Laodiceans (Rev. 3:15-20). He invites the lukewarm, self-deluded people to open to him so he can fellowship with him. They were not put through some long time of conviction.

Listen! If your house had caught on fire, how alarmed would you have to feel about it in order to be saved? Just enough to get out! It doesn't matter whether you leave crying 'Oh! My house, my house' or not. It doesn't matter if you are in a panic or just a bit upset. THE ONLY GOOD YOUR EMOTIONS AND FEAR ARE IS TO GET YOU TO LEAVE. The only good conviction of sin is to get you to repent and humble yourself under the mighty hand of your king. So submit! Don't wait to feel a certain way. [Ultimately, anyone who is concerned about lack of sorrow and feeling is caught in a self-righteous spirit. He hopes to please God with his pious feelings. Don't allow this. Confront him.]

4. "I'm too bad/depressed." Look how far Jesus came to save sinners! Are you worse than Paul? (I Tim. 1:15) Jesus loves to save sinners; he delights to do it. (Luke 15:7; Is. 53:11; Zeph.3:16-17). The Bible says God is "mighty to save"; are you saying that He is not strong enough to deal with your sins? Are you mightier than God? [Again, remember that this complaint is often a subtle form of self-righteousness. The man thinks he is unworthy. Then he is assuming his worthiness is the necessary basis for coming to Christ.]

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What did you find most interesting/helpful?**

2. **What questions did this raise?**

3. **Is there anything here you wish you knew when you were a young Christian?**

New mission breakthrough

Study 12 | Acts 11:19 - 12:24

INTRODUCTION

The city of Antioch was the third largest city of the Roman Empire (after Rome and Alexandria) and the capital of Syria. It was unusually multi-cultural and cosmopolitan, even for a large city. The city officials encouraged immigration, and offered Jews full citizenship. Thus there were very large, vital communities of Jews, Greeks, Romans, Asians, and Africans. This city becomes the site of the next new breakthrough in the Christian mission.

1. **11:19-24. What was the distintive feature of gospel communication at Antioch? How do you think their preaching would have been different from the preaching of Peter that we have seen? What were the results of this ministry?**

2. **11:22-26. What were the reasons that Barnabus was sent? What were the elements of his ministry — and the results of it?**

3. **11:19-30. Look at the whole history of the young church in Antioch. Mark the number of stages in its development and name each one.**

4. **Why do you think that Christians weren't called "Christians" until Antioch (v.26)? Why do you think the Antioch church was so successful in showing the power of the gospel?**

5. **12:1-24. What does the incident about Peter teach us about prayer?**

ENCOURAGEMENT PROJECT

Read and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

Introduction
Acts 11:19ff shows the importance of the ministry of encouragement. vv.22-24 virtually glows as we read it. Clearly, Barnabus' ministry of encouragement was enormously powerful in the history of the church. We tend to underestimate the importance of this work. Barnabus' ministry is "sandwiched" between the ministry of evangelism and of training/discipleship. It is a crying need of new Christians in particular, and it is like the "oil" in the church's "engine" — it is a vital spiritual lubricant. Without it, we burn up and burn out.

Definition
The very name "Barnabus" means "son of consolation". Encouragement is not the same as discipling and teaching. It is not the same as evangelism. It is affirming, confirming, supporting, coaching, consoling, cheering. It doesn't seem to take as much knowledge or skill as evangelism or discipling *per se,* but here we see the power. Without encouragement, we will never do the work of evangelism and discipling that we need to do.

The very Greek word translated "encouragement" is *"para-kaleo"* which literally means "to call alongside". It means to come near, to identify closely, to motivate and build confidence and create endurance in another person. To encourage is not to say, "get going" or "do what I have done" but "let's get going". An encourager is good at putting him or herself in another's shoes. It is often used as a synonym for "counseling" in the New Testament.

In some of these passages *parakaleo* is translated "exhort", but it is always exhorting with a strong proportion of comfort and affirmation.) Encouragers are patient (I Thess.5:4) gentle, affectionate (I Thess.2:7-11), positive and non-argumentative (II Tim.2:24-26), and is more effective when using the Bible skillfully (Rom.15:4; II Tim.4:1-4).

Place
Encouragement is especially important for newer believers, which we see both here and in Acts 14:21-22, where again we see that encouragement is something done for young converts after they have heard the good news.

Encouragement is also something necessary for those going through difficult times (II Cor.1:-9; Acts 14:22-23).

Sometimes even people who are being disobedient respond better to encouragement (II Thess.3:11-13; Heb.3:13) than to warning.

Responsibility
So often our problems are aggravated because we do not have encouragers in our lives. Sometimes we don't get encouragement because we are too proud to seek it or let people know we need it. Other times we are afraid that if we share our weakness we will get warning instead of encouragement. We have to be willing, however to meet and make ourselves vulnerable to others (James 5:16; Heb.10:24-25), in order to receive encouragement from God through other brothers and sisters.

It is also our duty to look around us and notice who needs encouragement. On the one hand, all Christians are to encourage each other (Heb.3:13; 10:24-25), and therefore we must always be on the look out. But some people have a gift of this — it is listed as a spiritual gift in Romans 12:8. One sign that you are good at this is that people tend to want to open up to you about their problems. Consider ways that you could make better use of this gift. The church needs more Barnabuses!

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Think of other marks and characteristics of an encourager.

Is the ministry of encouragement something you particularly need right now?

Is it something that you could give to someone in need right now?

Acts

Paul presents the Gospel

Study 13 | Acts 12:25 - 13:52

1. **vv.1-3. This body became the first missionary-sending body in history. What led them to this? Notice the role of a) their leadership make-up, b) their routines, c) the Holy Spirit.**

2. **vv.1-3. What can we learn from this incident for our own churches today?**

3. **vv.6-12. Why was Paul so forceful with Elymas? Why was the miraculous judgement on Elymas appropriate?**

4. **vv.13-41. Read Paul's gospel presentation. What can you tell from the address about its intended audience? How does he make the case that Christianity is true in vv.16-25 and 31? What does he say the heart of Christianity is in vv.26-37? How does he call upon them to respond in vv.38-41?**

5. **vv.42-52. a) Why do the ones that reject the gospel do so? b) Why do the ones who accept the gospel do so?**

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

How can we communicate the gospel to someone so that they can receive Christ and become children of God (John 1:12-13)?

The character of the gospel in the book of Acts
The gospel is the essential Christian message. In the book of Acts we see the apostles delivering it in every place and setting. It is called *"the gospel"* (Acts 14:7,21;16:10), *"the gospel of God's grace"* (Acts 20:24), *"the word of his grace"* (Acts 20:32), *"the good news about the Lord Jesus"* (Acts 11:20), *"the message of the gospel"* (Acts 15:7), *"the message of his grace"* (Acts 14:3), *"the message of his salvation"* (Acts 13:26), or even just *"the message"* (Acts 11:19. cf.Acts 2:41;4:4;10:44:17:11). What do we learn from these descriptions in Acts?

First, we learn that the gospel is not so simple and rigidly fixed that it is presented identically in every setting. A survey of gospel speeches in the book of Acts shows what great variety in presentations there were. The gospel is adapted differently to different audiences.

Yet, second, we see, that this is a very definite and limited body of knowledge with a set content. Thus the writer refers to *the* word, *the* message. We see from the accounts in Acts that it can be expounded in a single talk. It can be "received" (Acts 8:14;17:11). We are told that when Cornelius' household *"received"* the message (11:1), the Holy Spirit fell on them (10:44). This shows that the gospel is not "everything in the Bible", but a set of core truths which, when understood and received, saves us.

Third, we see that when the gospel is summed up in one or two words, it is usually said to be about *"salvation"*, *"grace"* or *"the Lord Jesus Christ"*. Thus we see the essential message is that through Jesus we are saved by grace.

Does is the gospel "elementary" truths as opposed to "advanced" truths? No. The gospel does not relate so much to the rest of Christian truth as the first step relates to a staircase, but rather as the heart relates to the rest of the circulatory system (or as the brain relates to the nervous system). The rest of Christian truth is just an unfolding of the gospel — it is the working out of its implications and ramifications, intellectually, spiritually, behaviorally.

An overview of the gospel in the book of Acts
Despite the significant adaptations, depending upon the audience, each gospel presentation has several core components. John Stott breaks them down into four basics, and calls them the gospel "events, witnesses, promises, conditions" (See J.Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.79-81). Over and over again,

the apostles talk about "gospel events" (Jesus' death and resurrection for our sins), "gospel promises" (objective pardon for sins and subjective freedom and joy), "gospel witnesses" (the testimony of the Bible and the eyewitnesses to the resurrection), and "gospel conditions" (the requirements of repentance and faith).

These do not come in the same order or in the same terms, and it is very important to notice that. This means that we are free to juxtapose these in the best way to reach people in our particular time and place. But these components are always there. We will reorganize the outline and give new names.

THEORETICAL OUTLINE

"Why should I believe?"

The Case
Relevance ("gospel promises") We show the listeners that the gospel answers their deepest problems and issues. They should receive it because they need it.

Credibilty ("gospel witnesses") We show the listeners that the gospel is supported by strong evidence. They should receive it because it is true.

"What must I believe?"

The Content ("gospel events") The heart of the gospel.
Sin and self-salvation. We show the listeners that they are under the guilt and power of sin, which leads them to seek to be their own savior and lord.

Grace and Christ's salvation. We show the listeners how Jesus life, death, and resurrection in our place saves us and opens the way to God.

"How can I believe?"
The Commitment ("gospel conditions")

Turning. We show the listeners that they must turn away from their former life and honor Christ as Lord.

Trusting. We show the listeners that they must trust cease self-salvation activity and trust Christ as Savior.

PRACTICAL OUTLINE

We see in the book of Acts that changes in the audience most effect how the "case" part of the gospel is presented. The Case part of the gospel addresses the basic question, "why should I believe this?" As we outlined it, there are two very important and fairly different lines of argument for Christianity. First, people should believe because they need it, it is relevant to them. It meets the deepest aspirations of the human heart, and solves the most basic problems of the human condition. But second, people should believe because it is true, regardless of what they believe. It is the most rational way to account for the world and life we see. To sum up — "why should we believe?" Because it is both subjectively true (the relevance case) and objectively true (the credibility case).

As important as these two "cases" are, they are rather different. Some people and groups have an acute consciousness of subjective needs, and they will be extremely sensitive to hearing more of the relevance-case. Others may have low awareness of any subjective needs, and they must be pressed to see the objective truth of Christianity, whether they like it or not! Which of these should come first? We see Paul talking to religious educated people in Pisidian Antioch, and there the credibility case (Acts 13:16-31) came before relevance case (Acts 13:38-39). But in Lystra, when Paul was speaking to uneducated pagans, the appeal and relevance case (Acts 14:15a) comes before the credibility case (Acts 14:15b-17). How do we do it today? Obviously, we need to be flexible, but here is a good procedure for our time and place.

Step #1 – Case for relevance *Answers: "Why do I need this?"*

First, we discern the person's own "themes of relevance" — basic aspirations/hopes and fears/struggles. Then we ask how their basic beliefs about God and the world are helping them face these things.

Step #2 – Brief content *Answers: "What is the Christian message?"*

Second, we supply a brief gospel summary but geared to show how it meets the needs of the listeners, their "themes of relevance". This is a "brief summary of the gospel" (see previous document) which is not designed to explain the whole.

Step #3 – Case for credibility *Answers: "How can you know it's true?"*

Third, we begin to answer more intellectual objections. The brief summary lets them set the agenda, so you do not answer questions they aren't asking. Sometimes there is a return to "relevance", with questions about "how does it work for you?"

notes

Step #4 – Full content *Answers: "What must I believe?"*

Fourth, we return and unpack the gospel, this time explaining the two basic points more fully — who we are (the character of sin), and who he is and what he has done (the character of God, Christ, and grace). Sometimes this leads back to step 3 again!

Step #5 – Commitment *Answers: "How can I believe — make it mine?"*

Fifth, we explain how to appropriate the work of Christ, so that the gospel promises (named under "the case for relevance") become ours. This always has two parts — both turning and trusting, repenting and resting, making him Lord and Savior.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **What does your own experience of witnessing in New York City lead you to think about the "Practical Outline"? Is this a good order?**

4. **Have you used the "Brief Summary of the Gospel" from a former week? What are the questions you are getting in response to it?**

Acts
The Gospel for pagans

Study 14 | Acts 14:1-28

1 **vv.1-7. What were the three main stages of the work at Iconium? What lessons do we learn for our own ministry?**

2. **vv.8-15a. What does the crowd's reaction to the healing of the crippled man tell us about them?**

3. **vv.15-17. Though this is a brief summary of Paul's talk, compare it to the talk in Acts 13:16ff. How is it different from that talk and why? To what kind of person would Paul bring such a message today?**

4. **vv.15-17. How is the talk in Acts 13:16ff the same as the speech to the Lycoanians? What can we learn from the comparison and contrast of the two speeches?**

5. **vv.21-28. Make a list of all the principles of "follow-up" and ministry that Paul and Barnabus followed after the many were converted. Were you properly "followed up"? Do you properly "follow up"?**

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part II – CASE FOR RELEVANCE

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

How can we communicate the gospel to someone so that they can receive Christ and become children of God (John 1:12-13)? First, we make a "case for relevance" — we discern the person's own "themes of relevance" — basic aspirations/hopes and fears/struggles. Then we ask how their basic beliefs about God and the world are helping them face these things.

BRIDGE BUILDING

1. Building trust.
According to Aristotle, persuasive people combine three different factors in themselves. *"Logos"* means they are able to demonstrate clear and persuasive reasons for what they believe. They show how their minds were changed. But on its own, "Logos" will not persuade, since is rationality is only one aspect of human nature. *"Pathos"* means they show are able to demonstrate both a passion and a compassion as they communicate what they believe. Thus they demonstrate how their hearts were changed. Finally, *"Ethos"* means that they are able to demonstrate attitudes and a lifestyle consistent with what they believe. They show how their life was changed. Persuasion involves appeals to reason, emotion, and experience. Persuasive people earn trust by their thoughtfulness, warmth, and integrity.

Thus the Christian develops redemptive relationships of active listening, service, authenticity and consistency. This takes time but it creates openness to the message when it comes from you. Through discussions and interaction, the Christian discerns "themes of relevance" (see below) — things that are burning issues for the non-Christian.

2. Identifying themes of relevance.
A theme of relevance is some true concern or conviction which arises from the person's creation in the image of God. The Christian makes contact with the knowledge of God which every non-Christian has (Rom.1:18-21). Apologetics recognizes that non-Christians do know the truth about God, but it is

intellectually and emotionally repressed. he Christian makes contact with the image of God which every non-Christian has (Gen.1:27). Apologetics recognizes that non-Christians' deepest longings demonstrate the absence of God in a heart that was designed for him. We were created to be rational, relational, creative, eternal. And a person fears death, treats love as a reality, and longs for justice and freedom even when his/her world view can neither explain or satisfy those impulses.

What are examples of "themes of relevance"? These are the person's greatest hopes, fears, aspiriations. There are two basic categories of them. There are Life Priorities, and Life Problems. Life Priorities include *Major job and vocational issues* ("My job isn't fulfilling, I don't know if I want to spend my life on this"); *Overall life goals* ("In my life I want to accomplish…"); *Heroes and ideas* ("The person/idea that influences me most…"); *Analysis of world problems* ("I think the problem with our society is…"); *Love and marriage* ("Marriage isn't for me…"). Life Problems include *Guilt or anger about the past* ("I regret… I have trouble with"); *Anxiety and fears about the future* ("I am very worried about…"); *Boredom or frustration with the present* ("Nothing tastes…") *Ethical dilemmas* ("I don't know what the right thing to do is…")

3. Identifying belief position

A "belief position" is what the person consciously believes about theological and religious issues. This includes what they believe about God, about Jesus, about life after death, about human nature, and so on. But a person's essential belief position can be ascertained by looking at these basic questions. *God's nature.* ("I think God is…") *Human nature.* ("What I think is basically wrong with people… (or) what I think is the reason most people are unhappy…") *Moral order.* ("I think that the way to determine right and wrong is…") *Spiritual meaning.* ("I think what would ultimately fulfill me…")

You will discover two basic kinds of non-believers — those who subscribe to the basic beliefs of the Christian faith, but have not understood or "grasped" the gospel. They are trying to save themselves by being good. These people are not very secular, and generally you can simply demonstrate the case for relevance with a personal testimony, and go immediately to the full content of the gospel (there is seldom a need to make a case for credibility). But in NYC, most people will be more secular, and will reject most or all basic Christian doctrines. Therefore you need to identify their belief position, and make the case for relevance as in #4 below.

4. Arousing interest.

a. Show tension between their theme and their belief.
The fundamental way to arouse interest in the gospel is to show a person a tension between their themes of relevance (which reveals their primal understanding that there is a God) and their belief position (which expresses their conscious denial of the Biblical God.)

b. Relate a brief presentation of the gospel to their theme.
Once you have pointed out some tension between the person's concern or conviction and his or her belief position, make a brief presentation of the gospel in such a way that shows how it addresses the person's "theme".

The following example shows how this works. It is adapted from account of a conversation between Becky Pippert (BP) with a black female law student (LS) on a bus in Salem, Oregon. (in *Out of the Salt Shaker*, IVP, 1979, p.160ff.)

Becky meets LS on the bus and introduces the subject of heroes.

LS: "I guess Karl Marx is my hero." [Editor's note: Remember, this was 1979!]

BP: "What makes him your hero?"

LS: "I think his ideas were great — they haven't always been carried out rightly of course."

BP: "But what exactly is so great about his ideas?"

LS: "He's my hero because of his passionate regard for the oppressed"

BP: "I agree with that concern, but… I know Marx holds no belief in God."

LS: "Yes… he sees the universe as godless, and we have meaning only in a corporate sense of class. We are not significant as individuals."

BP: "Yet you admire his regard for the oppressed even though they are ultimately insignificant. It seems strange to value people so highly when they are random products of a universe. Why not manipulate them as you please?"

LS: "I couldn't do that… I guess if my natural response is to feel [individuals] are significant then I need a philosophic system that says the same things… But I believe we are basically good. If we could just live in a classless society, we would be free of the things that weigh us down…

BP: "Listen, I know a guy who is one of the worst racists...if he lived with you for fifty years in your classless society, he would still think 'nigger'. How can Marx wipe out the ugliness and hatred of a bigot?"

LS: [Eyes glaring] "We've been trying to change that for centuries… And all the rules and laws in the world can't… make you love me."

BP: "Look, you tell me you know individuals are significant, and you need a system that says so. Now you're saying that the real evil comes from within us. For external rules or laws can curb but cannot transform behavior. So you need a system that regards evil as internal and a solution that transforms radically not curbs superficially. Right?… Well, that's the very kind of system I've found."

LS: "Hey, what kind of revolution are you into?"

(Pippert) "When I told her I followed Jesus, I think I had better not quote her exact words of response! But after she recovered from her shock she asked me how I knew it was true. For the rest of our trip she asked me to defend Christianity. She listened intently, and when we arrived she said, 'I'd like to get together again… When I went home this weekend my younger sister came to see me, too. Then she told me she'd become a Christian. I told her it was anti-intellectual and unsubstantiated. In a furor I packed my bags, walked out saying I never wanted to discuss it again. And here I got on a bus and sat down next to you.' We do indeed worship the Hound of Heaven."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **Think of one key relationship you have with a non-Christian. Which of the three factors in "building trust" do you most need to work on, if you are to be a more effective witness?**

4. **How does Becky Pippert uncover a "theme of relevance" for the law student? How does she uncover her "belief position"? How does she show the contradiction between the two? How does she adapt her gospel presentation to the theme of relevance?**

Acts
Clarifying the Gospel

Study 15 | Acts 15:1 - 16:5

1. **a) Did the "some men" in vv.1-5 represent the apostles' position in Jerusalem? b) Why were they contending that the Gentile converts of Paul were not obeying the law of Moses? (Were they breaking the 10 commandment?)**

2. **Read 13:42-48. How is this the background for the crisis of chapter 15? What was different about the Gentiles Paul preached to in the synagogue (v.43) and the Gentiles who Paul turned to in v.46b? Why and how did Paul's ministry arouse such opposition from some Jewish Christians (15:1-2)?**

3. **vv.7-11. Of what three facts does Peter remind the Council, and what conclusions does he draw from them?**

Application question: How is this problem of culture a continual one for the Christian church, even when the particular issue is not Jewish-Gentile tensions?

4. **vv.12-21. a) How does James solve the problem theologically? How does he solve it practically? b) Read vv.22-35. What does this entire debate and event teach us about what to do when Christians differ?**

5. **16:1-5. Is Paul's behavior with Timothy seem in tension with his uncompromising stand in 15:1-5? What does this teach us about where to contend and where to compromise?**

Acts

Three surprising conversions

Study 16 | Acts 16:5-40

1. **vv.1, 6-10. Trace these moves on a map to see how unusual a route this is. a) On the basis of other passages in Acts, what are the possible ways that the Holy Spirit may have been guiding them away from these provinces? b) What does this incident tell us about how God will guide us?**

2. **vv.11-15. What are we told about Lydia? How did she come to faith? What signs are we given that Lydia was truly converted?**

3. **vv.16-19. Contrast the pre-Christian spiritual state of the slave-girl with that of Lydia. Contrast the ministry of Paul to Lydia with that of Paul to the slave-girl. What is Luke trying to show us?**

4. **vv.19-40. a) What led the jailer to believe? b) Compare his pre-Christian spiritual condition with that of Lydia and the Pythoness. c) How does Paul lead him to Christ? d) Why does Paul insist on a public apology v.37?**

5. **Surely there were many conversions at Philippi. Why do you think Luke chose three such disparate people to profile for readers?**

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part III – B – CONTENT: PRESENTATION #1

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

As we said last week in the introduction, there are two basic kinds of person to share the faith with in our western society today — persons with a more traditional world view, and persons with a more deeply secular world view. Therefore we provide two ways to present the gospel, one for each kind of person. They differ mainly in how they demonstrate the hearer's need for Christ, in how they present the guilt and danger of sin. Presentation #1 (this week's project), called *"Sin as Separation"*, is for people of a more traditional mindset. These are people with a) a belief in God and b) a definite sense of obligation to absolute moral standards. Presentation #2 (next week's project), called *"Sin as Slavery",* is for people of a more deeply secular mindset. They are people with a) no belief in a personal God and/or b) little concept of any absolute moral standards.

The "Brief Summaries" and the Extended Gospel Presentations
How do these two extended gospel presentations provided in weeks 16 and 17 relate to the "Brief Gospel Summaries" of week 6? The "Separation" presentation is an extension of the "Law-Love" summary of the gospel provided in the Week 6 project. The "Slavery" presentation is an extension of the "Slavery-Freedom" summary of the gospel provided in Week 6. These two summaries take different perspectives on the subject of sin, and therefore are slanted toward one kind of listener or the other. The other two summaries, "Do-Done" and "Sin-Salvation", would fit with presentations either way, since they both focus not so much on our need, but on how salvation is accomplished by Christ.

The following is very extensive. I will provide an "easy outline" and summary later.

PRESENTATION #1 (Sin as Separation)

Pre-Presentation
Refer to previous material on building trust, finding themes of relevance, and sharing a gospel summary. The following assumes that this presentation is not an abrupt or an inappropriate changing of the subject.

Opening question: "WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND TO BE THE GENERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR BEING ACCEPTED BY GOD OR FOR ADMISSION TO HEAVEN?"

This question serves two purposes. First, it is a "qualifier", since it confirms or denies your assumption that this person has definite concept of God and moral absolutes (and is thus best helped with the "Separation" approach). The person's answer may reveal that they are not sure there is a God, or do not believe in an afterlife of rewards based on moral behavior. They may say things like: "well, I think when we die, that's it." or "I think if there is a God, God is just the power of love and life" or "I think God accepts everyone" or "I think after death we all just get absorbed into God, the light" or "if there is a God and heaven, it will just depend if you followed your own beliefs very fervently". In some cases, they may be very turned off or so confused by the question that they simply do not answer it. All these responses indicate that the person would be more helped by the "Slavery" presentation.

Second, this question identifies the person's "salvation system". It reveals if they believe in a "good works" system or a "grace" system for approaching God. These are the only two possible answers, though there are a great variety of forms. National surveys show that 35% of Americans, when asked this questions and given 7 possible answers, choose "because I have confessed my sins and accepted Christ as my Savior" (G.Barna, *Evangelism That Works,* p.45n). The large majority of responses to this question then are "works" answers. Examples are: "you have to — be a decent person" "follow the golden rule" "obey the 10 commandments" "go to church" "follow the example of Jesus" "it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are a loving person". Often they may give a vague answer such as "you have to ask God for forgiveness". But always probe for the real foundation for their hope. Ask "but why would he forgive someone for sin?" Often they will say, "because we are very sorry for them and really want to do better" or "because God is very loving". All these show a lack understanding that we are separated from God by our sin and no amount of good works or good intentions can bridge the gap. A "grace" answer does not have to be perfectly precise, but must show that the perso knows they are too weak to live up to God's standards, that they separated from God and are accepted only by mercy through Jesus.

Note 1: Sometimes people say they believe in God and heaven, but when you get into your discussion, you will find they insist that everyone and anyone is saved or loved by God, no matter what. Essentially, they have no sense of obligation to be good. (You may ask: "do you really mean *everyone* is accepted? Even genocidal dictators?" They may back off then, and you find that they do believe in moral standards, just very low ones!) People who insist on this kind of universalism or relativism (despite seeming to have a definite belief in God) are candidates for Presentation #2--Sin as slavery.

Note 2: People with a Catholic backgrounds need to realize that some Protestants seem at first sight to believe in a "grace system" but really do not. People from conservative Protestant churches may give a general answer like: "you have to believe that Jesus died for you" or "make a decision for Jesus". But if you ask, "why does that get you in?" you may find that they really believe they have to love and follow Jesus as a way to be good enough for God. Many people with Protestant backgrounds have what's been called a "sincerity covenant" — they try to live the best they sincerely can and Jesus makes up the rest with this forgiveness. That is salvation by a "works-and-a-little-grace" system. On the other hand, people with a Protestant background need to realize that some Catholics seem at first sight to believe in a "works system" but really do not. Catholics who believe they are saved from first to last by grace will take hold and receive that grace by taking the Sacraments (of baptism and the Lord's Supper). That does not mean that they are relying on their works for salvation. In the final analysis, however, most people with Protestant and Catholic backgrounds are trying to go to God on a "works system". They all need the gospel.

This question and approach is not new. D.James Kennedy made it popular in his book *Evangelism Explosion*, but evangelists have been using it for literally centuries. Here is an example of how the British pastor Charles Spurgeon shared the gospel in the mid-19th century with a "waterman", a ferry operator. This does not provide a good example of the language we should use, but it illustrates how the principles of the gospel have been used across time and culture.

Spurgeon: "Have you, my friend, a good hope of heaven if you should die?"

Waterman: "Well, sire, I think as how I have."

S: Pray tell me, then, what your hope is, for no man need ever be ashamed of a good hope.

W: Well sir, …I don't know that anybody ever saw me drunk...I do think as how I am as good as most folk that I know.

S: Oh dear! Oh dear! Is that all you have to trust to? ["The waterman then told me that he was charitable as well, and I told him that I was glad to hear it, but I did not see how his good conduct could carry him to heaven. He asked why."]

S: You have sometimes sinned in your life, have you not?

W: Yes, sir, that I have, many a time.

S: On what ground, then, do you think that your sins will be forgiven?

W: Well, sir, I have been very sorry for them,and I think they are all gone--they don't trouble me now.

S: Now, my friend, suppose you were to go and get into debt with the grocer where you deal, and you should say to her, 'Look here, missus, you have a long score against me, I am sorry to say that I cannot pay you for all those goods that I have had; but I'll tell you what I will do, I'll doe. I'll never get into your debt any more.' She would very soon tell you that was not her style of doing business; and do you suppose that is the way in which you can treat the great God? He is going to strike out you past sins because you say you will not go on sinning against Him?

W: Well, sir, I should like to know how my sins are to be forgiven...

S: ["Then I told him, as plainly as I could, how the Lord Jesus had taken the place of sinners, and how those who trusted in Him, and rested on His blood and righteousnesss, would find pardon and peace."] Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography: The Early Years,* pp.373-375

Follow-up questions: (If a "works" answer) "COULD I SHARE WITH YOU A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE, HOW YOU CAN KNOW GOD'S LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE AS A FREE GIFT, NOT ON THE BASIS OF (WHAT THEY JUST SAID)?" This gets permission to do the presentation. It has the integrity to say upfront that you are disagreeing with them, but the extremely positive expression "as a free gift" is usually winsome and elicits an affirmative answer. Go to the Presentation below.

(If a "grace" answer) "ARE YOU CONFIDENT THAT, IF YOU WERE TO DIE TONIGHT, YOU WOULD DEFINITELY GO TO HEAVEN?" This is called the "assurance" question". Though they may have given the "right" answer, and have an intellectual grasp of the gospel, this question helps reveal whether or not they have appropriated it for themselves. If they gave a grace answer and a "yes" answer to assurance, then as far as you can tell (without knowing them better), they are professing Christians. But if the person gives a "no" answer to assurance, it could be that they realize that they have never made the commitment themselves. Or it could mean that they have done this, but their lives and lifestyle has contradicted Christianity. In that case, they have a bad conscience which blocks their assurance. In all cases, you need to go to the part of the presentation that has to do with "Commitment" which we cover in a subsequent week.

Presentation

A. Sin

Read or quote Luke 10:25-27. **"ALL THE MORAL LAWS OF CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS AND EVEN COMMON SENSE BOIL DOWN TO TWO MORAL PRINCIPLES: 1) LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR BEING, AND 2) LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOU WANT TO BE LOVED."**

This really is common sense. First, if God really made us and keeps us alive every second, then we belong completely to him and we owe him everything. (Anything you create yourself is yours to do with what you will.) Second, the "golden rule" for loving others is something absolutely imprinted on us. You don't have to teach it to children, they know it instinctively before they can barely talk (e.g. "I gave you my toy, you give me yours.")

Read or quote I Corinthians 13:4-8a (to *"Love never fails"*). **"LOOK AT THE SECOND PRINCIPLE FIRST. PAUL SAYS THAT REAL LOVE ALWAYS FORGIVES, SERVES, AND ENDURES BECAUSE IT SHOULD BE UNCONDITIONAL. THAT IS HOW WE ALL WANT TO BE LOVED. YET WE DO NOT COME EVEN CLOSE TO GIVING OTHERS WHAT WE DEMAND OURSELVES. "** What is 'unconditional love'? It is loving people not for what they give you, but for simply for they themselves. If that was the case, then your love would never give up on them — there would be no conditions that it required. That is how we all want to be loved. We want to know that others love us, and not the things we are providing them. Yet we fail to do to others what we want from them. We do give up on people when they stop being kind and useful to us. **"THE GOLDEN RULE MEANS WE SHOULD MEET THE NEEDS OF OTHERS WITH THE SAME SPEED, JOY, AND RELENTLESSNESS WHICH WE USE TO MEET OUR OWN".** It does not take much reflection to see that the golden rule is absolutely right, we owe it, yet it is impossible to keep.

Read or quote Exodus 20:3. **"LOOK AT THE FIRST PRINCIPLE. GOD SIMPLY ASKS THAT THERE BE NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT TO YOUR THINKING, FEELING, AND BEHAVIOR THAN HE IS."** When Jesus said, *"Love him with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind"* he was only being reasonable. If we owe God absolutely everything, then we should not love anything more than him, nor depend on anything more than him. But do we come close? Use the test of your thoughts. When you have nothing else that you have to think of, what do you enjoy dwelling on? Is it God, or are there other things more absorbing and enjoyable. Of course, everyone on the earth does not find that God is the most important thing to their hearts. To put God first is absolutely right, we owe it, yet it is impossible to do.

Read or quote Romans 3:10. **"THE BIBLE IS CATEGORICAL THAT 'NO ONE IS RIGHTEOUS — NO, NOT ONE'. NO ONE COMES CLOSE TO OBEYING THE MOST REASONABLE AND COMMON SENSE MORAL PRINCIPLES."** Of course, some people are far more moral and decent than others, but Christianity says that is to only compare less unrighteous people to more unrighteous. Compared to what we all owe God and our neighbor, we all fail. For example, imagine if you asked three swimmers to swim from Hawaii to California. One cannot swim and drowns in a few yards; one is a good swimmer and drowns in four miles; one is a great swimmer and drowns in a hundred miles. Though one is many times better than the rest, they are all incapable of swimming to California, and they are all equally dead.

B. God. "CHRISTIANITY TELLS US 2 BASIC THINGS ABOUT THE NATURE OF GOD" — 1) Read or quote Psalm 11:7 **GOD LOVES JUSTICE AND THEREFORE CANNOT ACCEPT EVIL OR SIN AT ALL.** We all long for justice. If a man in a car was to back into your car and damage it, you would not be satisfied if he only said, "I'm sorry". You would want nothing short of justice. But God loves justice far more than we do; he is absolutely just and holy and cannot accept wrongdoing at all. **2)** Read or quote I John 4:8. **"GOD IS LOVE, AND HE SEEKS THE GOOD EVEN OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE DISOBEYED AND OPPOSED HIM."** It is perhaps too easy and popular today to believe that God is love. He is a God who wants to forgive and restore.

Transition: **BUT FORGIVING US IS, IN A SENSE, THE BIGGEST PROBLEM GOD HAS EVER FACED."** These two "sides" of his nature create a dilemma, a great problem.

3) Read or quote Exodus 34:5-7. **GOD LOVES US AND DOES NOT WANT TO PUNISH US, BUT IS JUST AND MUST PUNISH SIN.** When God revealed himself to Moses on Mt.Sinai he made a startling statement. He said that he was abounding in love and forgiveness, "yet" he will always punish wrongdoing. It seems impossible that God could be both. **"IT SEEMS HE CAN EITHER HE CAN LOVE US, AND NOT LOVE JUSTICE, OR HE CAN LOVE JUSTICE AND THEN NOT LOVE US — BUT HE CANNOT LOVE BOTH."** What a problem. If he does not love justice perfectly, what hope is there for the world? But if he *does* love us perfectly, what hope is there for us? Imagine an illustration. If a father was also a judge, and his guilty child was brought before him, he could not just acquit his child. He could either do what he wanted to do as a judge, or what he wanted to do as a father, but not both.

C. Christ.

1) Read or quote Acts 20:28. **GOD HIMSELF CAME TO EARTH IN HUMAN FORM AS JESUS CHRIST.** This text tells us that it was God's own blood shed for us. God became human and vulnerable and subject to death. **2)** Read or quote I Peter 2:22. **JESUS WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO EVER HAD A PERFECT RECORD — LOVING GOD AND HIS NEIGHBOR.** He lived the life we should have lived. **3)** Read or quote II Corinthians 5:21. **BUT ON THE CROSS THERE WAS A GREAT TRANSFER — HE IS TREATED AS OUR BAD RECORD DESERVES, SO THAT WE CAN BE TREATED AS HIS PERFECT RECORD DESERVES.** Look at the verse. It says that Jesus was "made… to be sin". Since Jesus did not actually become selfish, cruel, etc. on the cross, that means that he was treated as if he were sinful — he became "legally" sinful and liable for our sins. But it says that now it is possible for us to "become the righteousness of God". Since Jesus "became sin" by being treated as sinful, so we can "become righteous", be treated as perfectly righteous. He is treated as if our record is his, so we can be treated as if his record is ours. **THE GOSPEL IS: GOD TREATS BELIEVING SINNERS AS THOUGH THEY HAD LIVED THE LIFE JESUS LIVED AND DIED THE DEATH JESUS DIED.**

4) Read or quote Romans 3:26. This is the solution to the dilemma. The love of God fulfilled the law of God — in Christ on the cross. When Christ was punished, both his love for us and his love for justice were satisfied in one stroke *"that God might be <u>both</u> just and justifier [judge and father] of those who believe"* (Rom.3:26). **BECOMING A CHRISTIAN IS NOT ME DEVELOPING A RIGHTEOUS RECORD THROUGH MORAL EFFORT AND GIVING IT TO GOD; IT IS GOD DEVELOPING A RIGHTEOUS RECORD THROUGH CHRIST AND GIVING IT TO US.** A visual illustration to use at this point. Take a book: "this is a our record, full of sins". Take a blank white card or piece of paper: "this is Christ's record, perfect, a ticket into the presence of God". Put one in this hand and one in the other. Then switch them. "He gets our record, and sinks under it; we get his record and rise with it."

<u>D. Faith.</u>

1) Read or quote John 1:12-13. **BECOMING A CHRISTIAN NOT TRYING HARDER, BUT RECEIVING A STATUS — "RIGHTS AS CHILDREN OF GOD".** Notice that becoming a Christian is like being adopted. Adopting children is a legal act. In one moment, the children automatically become you heirs. So becoming a Christian is receiving this new status, being heirs of God's love and life. **IT IS RECEIVED BY "BELIEVING" — BY FAITH. 2) WHAT SAVING FAITH IS NOT.** Read or quote James 2:19. **MORE THAN INTELLECTUAL BELIEF.** The demons believed Jesus lived and died for sin, but they are not his children! Saving faith is not less than intellectual belief — you must have that — but it is more. Read or quote Phil.3:8-9. **MORE THAN TRUST FOR HELP AND STRENGTH.** It is possible to pray to God and trust in him for strength and protection, but still be trusting in your-*self* for salvation. Remember your answer to my first question: you said you thought it was possible to find God through (what they said). So you see, you may trust God for many things, but you are trusting yourself for your salvation.

3) WHAT SAVING FAITH IS. Read or quote Romans 4:5 (also refer back to Phil.3:8,9) **REAL FAITH IS REMOVING YOUR SAVING FAITH FROM WHERE IT IS NOW, AND PUTTING IT ON JESUS CHRIST. a) REPENT — NOT JUST FOR SINS, BUT FOR TRYING TO BE YOUR OWN LORD AND SAVIOR.** Paul says that first you must "not work": that means that you must see that you cannot earn God's favor with any moral effort, not even with efforts to develop a penitent, surrendered, sincere heart. You must admit that it can only be received. **b) BELIEVE — NOT JUST IN JESUS IN GENERAL, BUT IN JESUS AS YOUR NEW RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE GOD.** Then Paul says you must "trust God who justifies the wicked". That means you ask God to accept (justify) you solely for the sake of what Christ did for you. You say: "Lord, I know that right now I am 'wicked', but I can be just and acceptable through Christ. Receive me because of him." <u>Refer back to John 1:12-13. The moment you do this, you not only receive "rights" as children, but you are "born of God" — God's spirit comes in and begins to renew you</u>.

notes

IS NOT TRYING HARD TO QUALIFY FOR GOD, BUT ADMITTING THAT YOU CANNOT

First, of all — I have good news — better you have — but first, a much higher view of the law. Golden rule. I Cor.13 — go and do that! Do you?

Acts
The Gospel for intellectuals

Study 17 | Acts 17:1-34

1. **vv.1-9. If Paul's great burden is the win the Gentiles (cf. Eph.3:8) why does he always first go to the synagogue in any town? What are the implications for our own efforts to spread the gospel?**

2. **vv.1-9. What was Paul's basic strategy in Thessalonica and Berea? What was the reaction to it and why?**

3. **v.16-21. From what motives did Paul operate (what did he see and feel when he first saw Athens)? What can we learn from his example?**

4. **a) What can we tell about how Paul reasoned in the marketplace? (vv.17-18) b) How does he gain the interest of his hearers in vv.22-23?**

5. **a) What six principles (at least) does Paul lay out to show them who the true God is? (vv.24-31)) b) Some people have criticized this sermon as not being Christ-centered enough. How would you answer that? c) How does Paul's message fit this audience (refer to the introduction to the Athenian mission)?**

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part III – A – CONTENT: PRESENTATION #2

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

The following is very extensive. I will provide an "easy outline" and summary later.

PRESENTATION #1 (Sin as Separation)

Pre-Presentation

Refer to presentation #1 on "Pre-Presentation" and to the "Content: Introduction" on discerning whether a person would be helped by the following approach or not.

Opening question: **"WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND TO BE THE MOST IMPORTANT THING A PERSON NEEDS (OR YOU NEED) IN ORDER TO BE HAPPY AND FULFILLED?"** This question is an extremely direct way to find a "theme of relevance" as described in Part II. "Relevance". A more indirect approach might be preferable. The purpose of this question or its like is to find what the person thinks is real meaning in life. They are likely to give a fairly general, impersonal answer, like "find what they really want to accomplish in life and do it" or "find people who love and accept you for who you are". You should follow that up with genuinely interested queries to explain, like: **"HOW MANY PEOPLE REACH THAT, DO YOU THINK?" "WHY OR WHY NOT?" "HOW EASY OR HARD ARE YOU FINDING IT?"** Just as, in Presentation #1, it is important to understand their answer, in order to refer back to it later, so it is here.

Follow-up question: **"COULD I SHARE WITH YOU A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE, THAT THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN NEED IS NOT JUST (WHAT THEY JUST SAID) BUT TO KNOW AND EXPERIENCE GOD PERSONALLY, AND HOW THAT IS POSSIBLE?** This gets permission to do the presentation. It has the integrity to say upfront that you are disagreeing with them, but the extremely positive expression "know and experience God" is usually winsome and elicits an affirmative answer. Go to the Presentation below.

notes

Presentation

A. The problem — Slavery.

1) NOBODY IS BORN WITH A SENSE OF WORTH OR VALUE IN THEMSELVES. All persons need to establish a sense of worth or value — nobody is born just having it. And we cannot just give it to ourselves — we must have the love and approval of others. Now there are innumerable ways we seek this sense of worth — career, possessions, appearance, love, peer groups, achievement, good causes, moral character, family, personal "bests", certain kinds of relationships — or a combination of a several. A very liberal person will have a different path by which to prove him or herself than a very conservative person. But we all have a path. This means two things —

2) THAT EVEN THE MOST IRRELIGIOUS ARE REALLY WORSHIPPING SOMETHING. Whatever thing or things from which we choose to derive our value become the ultimate meaning in our lives. Whatever is ultimate serves as a 'god' and a 'righteousness' even if we don't think in those terms. These things control and disappoint us if we find them, and devastate us if we lose them. For example, they enslave us with guilt and self-hatred (if we fail to attain them) or with anger and resentment (if someone blocks them from us) or with fear and anxiety (if they are threatened) or at least with drivenness (since we must have them). In other words, we are not free. Whatever is the most important thing in life for us controls us. We do not control ourselves.

3) THAT EVEN THE MOST RELIGIOUS, ARE NOT REALLY WORSHIPPING GOD. There are plenty of religious and moral people in the world. But they are not fundamentally different from the irreligious people, because they too are trying to prove themselves through their performance in order to establish their value and worth. They may use religion and morality to do it. They may look to God as Helper, Teacher, and Example, but their moral performance is serving as their Savior. They are just as guilty and self-hating if they fail it, just as angry and resentful if someone blocks it, just as fearful and anxious if something threatens it, just as driven "to be good". So there is no really fundamental difference between religious and irreligious people.

B. The Solution — Redemption.

The word "redemption" literally means — "bought out of slavery". Jesus came not primarily to be our Helper, Teacher, or Example, but as our Savior. We must see:

1) WE ARE LIBERATED NOT SO MUCH THROUGH THE TEACHING, AS THROUGH THE WORK OF CHRIST. Our deep sense that we need to be good and loving to others is not mistaken, but we will never earn our sense of worth by trying to love others. No one has ever "done unto others as we would have them do unto us". We will always fail. Jesus, came not primarily as example, but as a substitute. He came to live the life we should have lived and die the death we should have died (as penalty for our failures).

2) WE ARE LIBERATED NOT BY GIVING A WORTHY RECORD *TO* GOD, BUT BY RECEIVING A WORTHY RECORD *FROM* GOD. When we believe, we get Christ's spotless record, and therefore the rights that go with it. It is transferred — and then we are worth what Christ is worth. The Bible calls this worthiness our "righteousness". We all make something our righteousness. But Jesus' free righteousness is the only true righteousness. It is the only one that is perfect, can stand up to any circumstance or human failure.

3) WE ARE LIBERATED BECAUSE JESUS IS THE ONLY GOD WHO DOES NOT ENSLAVE. As a fish is only free in water, we are only free when serving Jesus supremely. For he is the only source of meaning that we cannot lose (freeing us from fear and anger) and that is a free gift (freeing us from guilt and drivenness). He is the only God who can forgive — none of the other ones can or will. Read or quote Matt.11:28-30. His "yoke" is the only one that does not enslave.

C. The Reception — Adoption.

How do we "receive" this record?

1) CHANGE NOT THE AMOUNT BUT THE DEPTH OF YOUR REPENTANCE. You have to "repent", but the repentance that receives Christ is not so much being sorry for specific sins (though it is that), but it is admitting that your main sin is your efforts of self-salvation, at trying to be your own Savior. Don't just repent of sins, but of the self-righteousness under all you do, bad and good. Repent not just for doing wrong, but for the reason you did right!

2) CHANGE NOT THE AMOUNT, BUT THE OBJECT OF YOUR FAITH. You have to "believe", but the belief that receives Christ is not so much subscribing to a set of doctrines about Christ (though it is that), but transferring your trust from your own works and record to Christ's work and record.

Read or recite John 1:12-13.

3) ASK DIRECTLY FOR A NEW FAMILY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, FOR JESUS' SAKE. Imagine you worked for a very rich man. Your relationship depended on your performance week by week. But then imagine that this man adopted you. Suddenly the relationship would become loving and intimate, and his wealth would all be yours automatically, and it would not come to you on the basis of your performance, but on the basis of the legal relationship. That's what it means to become a Christian. Pray: "Lord, if I have never done so before, I thank you for the magnificent, sufficient sacrifice of your Son for me, and I ask you to receive and adopt me as your child, not because of anything I have done, but because of what Christ has done for me."

notes

D. The New Life of Growth.
This new life of freedom grows over time. How?

1) THROUGH CONTINUAL REPENTANCE FOR RESIDUAL SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS. A new quality of life results as you learn to joyfully repent for remaining "idols", left-over systems of self-salvation. Under every problem there is something more important than Jesus that is operating as our functional righteousness and worth.

2) THROUGH A GROWING EXPERIENCE OF GRATEFUL LOVE. A new quality of life results as you lose the old motivation of selfish fear ("slave" mentality) and become empowered by the new dynamic of grateful love ("child of God" mentality). Without an experience of grace, all our good deeds are essentially self-interested, impersonal, and conditional. But the gospel moves us to love and serve God for who he is in himself.

Acts
Mission to Corinth

Study 18 | Acts 18:1-28

1. **Compare Paul's choice of ministry sites with 16:12, and what you recall from the rest of the book of Acts. What kinds of places does he give priority? Why? What impact should that have on Christians today?**

2. **vv.1-18. Notice the distinct stages in the Corinthian mission. What were they? What led to each move to a new stage? What obstacles did he meet at each stage, how did he respond each time, and how did God respond each time?**

3. **vv.8-11. What is surprising about the emotional condition of Paul in v.9 in light of v.8? Should it be surprising? Why would Paul find ministry in Corinth so difficult (cf.I Cor.2:2-3)? How does God respond to him?**

4. **Collect and list all the ways that God's help and encouragement comes to us. What can we learn from a) Paul's actions and b) God's directions (in v.9-10) about how we can receive God's help ourselves?**

5. **vv.24-28. What can we learn for our own effectiveness in ministry from Apollos? From Priscilla and Aquila?**

Acts
Mission to Ephesus

Study 19 | Acts 19:1-41

1. **vv.1-7. Recall what we know about Apollos (18:24-28). How does that account for the "problem" of these men? Do you think these men were Christians? Look at Paul's questions and try to discern what elements were missing and what elements must be present before a person can truly said to be a Christian?**

2. **vv.8-22. What was Paul's main method in his mission in Ephesus, and how does it compareand contrast with those in Corinth and Athens? Make a list of all the methods of evangelism you've seen Paul use.**

3. **Take some time to reflect on how Paul's mission methods (especially in Acts 17-19) instruct the modern church? What does he do that we neglect or omit?**

4. **vv.11-20. What can we learn: a) about the place of miracles in ministry from vv.11-12, b) about the power of Jesus' name from vv.13-16, c) about the marks of real conversion from vv.17-20?**

5. **vv.23-41. What caused the riot? What lessons can we draw from it? What do you think was Luke's purpose in relating this account of the riot?**

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

The following is part of a series of sheets to give and discuss with friends who don't believe the Christian faith. This particular set of sheets is the most difficult. With many people, it would be good to skip some or all of them. But they will be absolutely necessary with a number of people, especially those who have thought through their objections to Christianity in a coherent way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**

4. **Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?**

B. HOW TO BELIEVE IN ANYTHING (B-1)

How can we come to know if a religion like Christianity is true? Before we outline an approach (in B-3), we need to deal with two common assertions in B-1 and B-2. These are by far the most difficult sheets of the series.

1. "I don't have to believe in God unless you can prove his existence."

Many people have taken this for granted for years, but there are grounds why this isn't a rational assertion (on its own terms), nor a fair one. First, it is in the end a self-contradictory statement. To say "belief in God is only rational if there is proof" puts a burden on belief in God that you don't put on yourself for many of your most basic beliefs. 1) You cannot prove that you were eating lunch today — because memory is something we must take on faith. 2) You cannot prove that because paper is flammable in the past it will be in the future, because cannot prove the uniformity of nature, but rather must assume it. 3) You cannot prove the existence of other persons, that your senses are showing you the real world "out there". Why not? You can't prove logic without using logic, which is to assume the very thing you are trying to prove. You can't prove that our sense experience is valid without using our sense experience, which is to assume the very thing you are trying to prove. You can't prove that the future will be like the past without saying, "well it always has been so in the past", which is to base your argument on the principle you are trying to prove. So we cannot prove our most basic beliefs about the existence of persons, the uniformity of nature, the reliability of our senses, and yet we consider someone who denies them as irrational!

I know that this kind of thinking makes one's head hurt. But we have to address this very common assertion. The assertion "a belief is only rational if it is proved by logic or scientific investigation" is then irrational on its own terms, since it cannot be verified in the way it makes demands on other assertions. "Proof", then, is not the only way to know things for certain.

Second, the statement is not fair. Belief in God is not like belief in the Yeti, the "abominable snowman". There would be no warrant to believe in such a thing without empirical proof. But two people who disagree about the Yeti can still agree about the rest of the reality, whereas two people who disagree about the reality of God have a different view of everything else. One person believes everything exists only because of God, and the other believes all things are able to exist "on their own". Now since the origin and the limits of the universe are hidden to us, both views of reality are assumptions of faith. So to disbelieve in God is at that moment to believe "I live in a universe in which nature is uniform and in which reason and sense perception work, all without God." How can you prove that? We've seen that you cannot. So the non-believer in God is not in a neutral, uncommitted position. You cannot act as if the Christian's world-view is on trial and yours is not. You cannot demand a proof for the Christian's basic beliefs about the universe that you yourself cannot produce.

(B-2)

2. "But you have demonstrated too much! Since no one can prove anything at all, no one can be sure of anything at all."

We have seen that a person who insists that basic belief in God must be proven gives reason "too much credit", how it cannot prove any foundational beliefs about the nature of the universe. But there is an opposite mistake that can be made — to give reason too little credit. Many people today are going beyond even the "no religion is superior" view of A-2 to a radical skepticism, saying that we cannot know any reality at all. Maybe, these folk say, our faculties don't tell us anything about the world as it is, but only impose a "structure" on reality. So we actually "create our own reality".

But this view is untenable because it is dishonest; it will not use its own critical tools on itself. Radical skeptics cannot disagree with using laws of logic without using laws of logic. They cannot communicate their points without expecting their words to be understood (thus showing their belief in the reliability of sense perception). They insist that our perception of reality is not reliable, but they are assuming then that there is an objective reality that exists or else they could not say we are failing to see it. In short, you cannot contradict the idea of truth without using it.

Where does this leave us? We said that the "basic beliefs" we mentioned in B-2 — memory, sense perception, the uniformity of nature, the reality of the external world, the laws of logic — that could not be proven without using them. But now we also see now that we cannot deny them without using them either. That shows that though we cannot prove them, we also cannot avoid knowing them, no matter how much we protest that we don't believe in them. We just "find ourselves" knowing these things inescapably. If you cannot even doubt something without affirming it, there is no use doubting it.

Where does this leave us? Pascal summarized it perfectly in *Pensee* 406. *"We have an incapacity for proving anything which no amount of dogmatism can overcome. We have an idea of truth which no amount of skepticism can overcome."* On the one hand, we must not make the "over-rational" objection that Christianity has to be proven before it can be believed. On the other hand, we must not make the "under-rational" objection that there is no objective truth, or that we cannot use our reason and senses to sift the evidence for it.

Summary: We really do know many things by evidence and probability, but almost nothing at all by "proof". Now that we have rid ourselves of 1) the demand for absolute proof, yet 2) radical skepticism about reason, and also 3) the mistaken notion that non-belief in God is neutral and objective, we can get to work to outline a way to sift and evaluate the evidence for Christianity.

(B-3)

3. "How can we test different sets of religious beliefs to come to know which ones are true?"

First we must recognize that everyone has a "world-view". This is a master theory of life which is a set of interlocking beliefs based on some ultimate criterion for determining truth and falsity. For example, your ultimate criterion might be logical consistency (rationalism — the mind), or empirical observation (empiricism — the senses), or one's own experience (existentialism — the feelings), or some religious authority (the Bible, Koran), or some other authority (family tradition, ethnic culture) etc. Now we cannot "prove" an ultimate critierion without using it, or without assuming some other one. For example, if an empiricist says, "I will only believe that which is proven scientifically", you could be asked, "but how can you prove that scientific proof is the only valid criterion for truth?" In that case he or she might say, "well, I know it in my heart — I just feel it is right." Now you are talking like an existentialist, and you aren't an empiricist! But the next question will be, "how can you know that your heart and experience is in touch with reality?" And so on.

So are we all stuck within our world-view frameworks? No. Thomas Kuhn, in his landmark book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, demonstrates how we interpret "facts" and "evidence" in terms of our own world view (what he calls a paradigm). But a stream of phenomena may become evident which the paradigm cannot explain. The lack of the paradigm's *explanatory power* leads the holders of the paradigm to question whether it is really in accord with reality. The holders may posit a new paradigm and see if the phenomena can better be explained and made to "fit" coherently in this new framework. If they can, there is a "revolution"! The old world-view or theoretical framework is shaken and falls to the ground and the new one is moved into.

Second, we need to test our world views using "givens" that we cannot avoid knowing. We have seen that all of us, regardless of our "ultimate criterion" cannot doubt without affirming certain "givens" — that there is a material universe, that nature is uniform, that our rational intuition works, and so on. If we agree on that these things are there, we now can ask: "whose world-view can best explain what we see, and whose world-view leads us to expect the opposite of what we see? We look at the premises of each world view and ask: if the premise of this world view leads to conclusions that do not fit with what we see, the "givens", then we need to reject the premises.

Third, no person can examine Christianity without at the very same time testing his or her own world-view. Our approach then will be to show that there is more evidence for Chriistianity than for any alternative world-view (and everyone has one). Though there are difficulties with the Christian faith, the alternatives have far more trouble accounting for and "making sense" of what we know. Our argument will be that Christianity explains and accounts for everything we observe, not just a narrow range of data. As Pascal put it: *"Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or our death, of God, or of ourselves."* Pensees 417

(B-4)

4. "But how can I be certain that Christianity is true before I believe in it?"

Actually you can't. But we must not be too dissappointed or even surprised at this. Why? First, because virtually everything else in life works on principles of rational probability, not certainty, and they suffice for us. Second, because God is personal, and persons cannot be known for certain without commitment.

First, consider how reason only takes us to a state of probability, and then we must commit if we are going to reach a state of certainty. The demand for "proof" was a quest for religious certainty apart from making a commitment. But the rest of life does not work that way. If you are going to hire someone to work for you in your office, rational inquiry can only indicate who is probably the right person for the job, but you will have to commit to the candidate (hire him or her) to be certain. Also, consider how evidence is sifted and evaluated in a court of law. The judge tells the jury to convict if the accused is guilty beyond a "reasonable" doubt, not beyond a possible doubt. In other words, it is virtually impossible to demonstrably prove that a person did a crime, but that is not necessary for the law to work.

Second, consider what we said, before, that belief in God is more like belief in other persons and minds than like belief in the Abominable Snowman. Imagine that both Susie and Sally want to marry Michael. Sally is a serial killer in prison, and she insists she will probably do it again; Susie is compassionate, disciplined, smart, and kind. How can Michael be sure which one will be the better wife? All the rational evidence points to Susie, not Sally. But he cannot be certain, he cannot prove that Susie will be a good wife until he marries her. There no certainty with persons before commitment. He also cannot prove that Sally will not change beyond a possible doubt — but he can be confident that she will be a bad wife beyond a reasonable doubt.

Now, in real life, this level of probability suffices us. Suppose Michael would say, "since you can't prove your case, and since it is possible that Sally will be a good wife, then that should be my position." We would retort, "why?" We would all think him irrational. Yet skeptics, in just this way, will often insist that, "since you can't prove your case, and since it is possible to disbelieve in God, then that should be my position."

So the purpose of our process of rational expression is to show that it is very rational to be a Christian, in fact, more rational than to hold to any other set of beliefs. When we have done that we have done our job. We can go no further, because no process of reasoning can rob us of the risk of commitment. If we cannot know any other significant person without it — what makes us think we could know God without it?

Acts

Farewell to Ephesus

Study 20 | Acts 20:1-38

1. **vv.1-16. Where was Paul heading when he set out from Ephesus? Why did he take such a roundabout route? How were these difficulties actually an advantage for Paul and the church? What do you learn from this for yourself (cf.Gen.50:20)?**

2. **vv.7-12. Why is Luke's story so detailed? How do the details tell us about what happened to Eutychus? What evidence is there that Luke is describing a resurrection, not a resuscitation? What do we learn here about early Christian worship?**

3. **Compare vv.17 and 28. What do we learn about how the early church was governed from these verses?**

4. **vv.18-36. Make a list of the specific duties that Paul urges Christian leaders to do either by a) example, and/or b) direction.**

5. **vv.18-36. Make a list of the specific character traits that Paul urges Christian leaders to have, either by a) example and/or b) direction.**

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Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

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C. WHY TO BELIEVE IN GOD (C-1)

An Overview

Let's recap. It is typical for people to say, "I'll believe in God if you can prove that he exists using reason and science". But God is a foundational concept, an "ultimate criterion" — for believers he is the way we explain and understand everything. Therefore, he cannot be proven any more than skeptics can "prove" their foundation, their "ultimate criterion" — namely that through reason and science we must explain and understand everything. No one can "prove" an ultimate criterion for truth without using it (or using another one). For example, if you say, "we can only be sure of what scientific observation proves" we can ask, "how do you know that, how can you 'prove' that?" You can't. Foundational concepts are assumed, and used to understand the world we see. Therefore, the way we test one foundation over another is by asking: "which view of the universe explains rationally what we see?" That is how we test scientific theories about entities that are not observable (such as quarks) — that is also how we also test faith-based worldviews, which we all have. When we put the theistic (believing in God) world view up against the non-theistic world view, we see that it makes much more sense of four things we see: **matter, morals, mind, music.**

Matter

What do we see? That the universe came into existence with a "Big Bang". That life would have been impossible on earth unless the fundamental constants of physics (the speed of light, the gravitational constant, the strength of weak and strong nuclear forces) were all calibrated to exactly as they are. If there is a God, the Big Bang and the beginning of organic life are perfectly rational and expected. If there is not a God, we would not expect them at all. These occurrences are (in such non-theistic world-view) highly unlikely — the chances are infinitesimally small. When the secularist says, "well, though there's no God, the universe and life just happened!" that means that though Christian world view DOES lead us to expect what we see, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we see (a big bang out of nothing, organic life out of inorganic) — why not change the premise?

Morality

What do we see? That we recognize some behavior as wrong absolutely, not just as a matter of opinion or taste or culture. If there is a God, the universal experience of a moral obligation, of moral outrage would be perfectly rational and expected. If there is not a God, we would not expect them at all. These things are (in a non-theistic world view) difficult to account for yet impossible to live without. When the secularist says, "well, though there's no God, some

things are definitely wrong!" that means that though the Christian world view DOES lead to expect this experience and conviction, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory — that there is no God — does not lead you to expect what we know (that some things are wrong, that some laws are unjust despite what the populace says) — why not change the premise?

Mind

What do we see? That we reason by a) trusting our senses, b) expecting the uniformity of nature, and c) trusting laws of logic. If there is a God, who is rational and created and sustained a rationally ordered universe, then these things are expected, and even obligatory. If there is not a God, if the universe is random, just matter in motion, then we would not expect them at all. These things are (in a non-theistic world view) difficult to account for, yet impossible to avoid, for we can only deny these things by using them. When the secularist says, "well, though there is no God, we just know reason works", that means — that though Christian world view DOES lead us to expect what we see, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we know (that nature is uniform, not random, that our senses can be trusted) — why not change the premise?

Music

What do we see? That all natural, innate desires correspond to real objects that can satisfy them, such as sexual desire (corresponding to sex), physical appetite (corresponding to food), tiredness (corresponding to sleep), aesthetic desire (corresponding to beauty), relational desires (corresponding to friendship). That there exists in us a desire that nothing in time and space can satisfy, a desire for an unknown "something" that no amount of food, sex, friendship, success can satisfy. That human beings everywhere and at all times have been overwhelmingly religious, believing in something beyond the here and now that will fill the desire for that "something". Therefore, *"if I find in myself a desire which no experience in the world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."* (C.S. Lewis) The secularist says, the secularist says, "well, though there is no God, we just know that this is the one innate, deep, normal desire that has no object." That means — that though Christian world view DOES lead us to expect what we see, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we know (that the vast majority of people sense that there is another world) — why not change the premise?

notes

Summary

Someone certainly has the right to say: "I don't want to be consistent — I'm just going to hold my views arbitrarily." Of course there is nothing that we said here that can compel or coerce anyone to believe. We should not even try to do that. But the point of our discussion is only to show that Christianity is more rational, that it makes more sense than non-theism. So to speak in this way is to concede that point.

Acts

Arrival at Jerusalem

Study 21 | Acts 21:1-26

1. **vv.1-9. What do we learn about a) the strength of Christian fellowship and b) the ways it is expressed and carried out? Can you share examples of how Christians you didn't know personally provided support and help for you?**

2. **Look at Romans 12:13; Titus 1:8; I Peter 4:9,10; Heb.13:2; Lev.19:33-34; Acts 16:15. What do they tell you about a) the importance and b) the expression of hospitality among Christians. How can you practice it if you don't have a family or a spacious home?**

3. **Is Paul disobeying the Spirit (v.4 and 10-11) by continuing on toward Jerusalem (v.14)? Cf. with 20:22-23.**

4. **vv.17-26. What signs were there that James' "Jewish" Christianity and Paul's "Gentile" Christianity were compatible? If so, what is the problem here, the point of difficulty?**

5. **vv.22-26. What does James recommend as a solution? How does Paul's action here reflect principles he himself has laid down elsewhere? (cf. Acts 20:24; I Cor.9:20-23; 10:32,33) How might these same principles affect our own attitudes toward others? Provide some specific example.**

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

The following is part of a series of sheets to give and discuss with friends who don't believe the Christian faith. This particular set of sheets is the most difficult. With many people, it would be good to skip some or all of them. But they will be absolutely necessary with a number of people, especially those who have thought through their objections to Christianity in a coherent way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**

4. **Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?**

C. WHY TO BELIEVE IN GOD (C-1)

The "Matter" Argument for God
One of the things we see when we look at the universe is order and design. There's a road out of Tennessee that passes a hillside with a set of rocks that spell out "Welcome to Georgia". Though these hundreds of rocks could have fallen into this pattern by chance,without an intelligent designer, it would be irrational to conclude that they did. Yet the structure and order of the human brain, or of the solar system itself, is billions of times more intricate.

"But doesn't evolution explain the design and structure of organisms?"
Evolution can only deal with *organic* design and it assumes the orderly forces of nature that even allow 'natural selection' to allow fit species to survive. Today, physicists tell us of the astonishing "fine tuning" of the universe that some call 'the Anthropic principle'. Life would have been impossible on earth unless all the fundamental constants of physics (the speed of light, the gravitational constant, the strength of weak and strong nuclear forces) were calibrated exactly as they are. For example, if the universe had expanded even a miniscule measure faster or slower (after the Big Bang), life would never have occured. The chances are extremely small that all this happned by accident.

"But what if there have been a countless series of universes over time and we just happen to find ourselves in the one conducive to life?"
Of course, our argument is "probabilistic" and it is possible that we just happened to find ourselves here. But Alvin Plantinga shows how irrational it is to live upon such a possibility. He asks us to imagine "Tex" dealing himself 10 straight hands of four aces in a game of poker. What if he said, "I know it looks suspicious! But what if there is an infinite succession of universes, so that for any possible distribution of possible poker hands, there is a universe in which that possibility is realized: we just happen to find ourselves in one where I always deal myself 4 aces without cheating?" It would be irrational to assume that Tex is not cheating, though you cannot prove the remote possibilty wrong. But the "fine tuning" of the universe is far less probable than 10 straight winning hands of 4 aces! While all the elements of design could have happened by chance, without an intelligent Creator, is it rational to live as if that remote chance must be true, just because no one can prove that it is not?

"But maybe the order we see is merely a product of our minds?"
This question puts you in a very awkward position. You are proposing that our minds are playing tricks on us, yet you want us both to use our minds to see it. You say, "maybe there is no order and intelligibility" but then why should our thinking be orderly about it?

Conclusion
The non-theists, then, are essentially saying: "well, though there's no God, the universe and life just happened!" that means that though Christian world view does lead us to expect what we see, and the non-theistic world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we see (a big bang out of nothing, organic life out of inorganic) — why not change the premise?

C-2

The "Morality" Argument for God

One of the things we see when we look at life is an inescapable sense of moral obligation. This is more than saying that there are moral "values" or moral feelings. All people know it is right to be generous, kind, honest, courageous, and fair — and wrong to be selfish, cruel, deceptive, cowardly and unjust. But what we mean by "right" is not merely that we feel good about such actions, but that people are obligated to them no matter what they feel about them. An obligation is objective, not subjective — it is "there" no matter what anyone thinks of feels about it. But if there is no God, it is very hard to see where these objective obligations come from.

"But I don't believe in objective moral obligation. Every moral statement in only an expression of the subjective feelings of the speaker".

Consider what you do when you affirm that there are no objective moral obligations. You are saying, "you ought not to evaluate me by your moral principles". But to say this you are pressing an obligation upon me that you are appealing to, that is outside of me, to which you say I ought to be accountable. Why? Now if there is a God who created a moral order, so that we are accountable to him and it, then surely it is fair to say, "we ought to be reasonable and tolerant". But if there is no objective moral obligation, how can you even make an argument? If you cannot deny objective moral obligation without using it, then you should admit that you do see it and believe in it.

"But isn't morality just a product of cultures and relative to them?"

The problem for those who espouse relativism is that they cannot avoid comparing cultures. Do you think that it was a good thing for America to abolish slavery? Are you critical of any ethical practices in your own culture? Do you think that child sacrifice was a bad thing? The only way you can do so is by appealing to objective moral obligations to which others are as bound as yourself.

"But isn't our sense of morality a product of evolution? It helped us survive."

One problem with this view is that it is difficult to prove that unselfishness, kindness, fairness are genetic traits that help one survive! But the problem is that the evolutionary theory can only account for moral feelings, not moral obligations. If a person says, "but there are not moral obligations, only evolved, genetically based moral feelings" that means that they espouse that murder and rape are not truly wrong, only impractical. But the one espousing this shows the very next moment that he or she does not believe it. They should never be morally outraged or hold anyone responsible for rape and murder. They should not ever hold people morally responsible for swindling and cheating. If our actions show that we believe certain acts to be objectively wrong despite our internal psychology, we show that we don't believe the evolutionary model to be true.

"But maybe there just <u>are</u> moral obligations. How does that prove God?"
This is a weak argument. What it is saying is: "while the view that there is a Creator God would lead us to expect moral obligations, and the view that there is no God would not lead us to expect it, I am going to hold to an atheistic viewpoint anyway". Moral obligations in a world without God mean that the atheistic world would be absurd. Here you have unavoidable obligations to do things that will give you no benefits in this life at all. Honesty and courage and love are often <u>extremely</u> impractical, leading to diminishment of money, health, even the end of life. Why would such obligations have ever arisen in a world where death is the end of everything?

Conclusion
We know that napalming babies, starving the poor, raping the vulnerable, and buying and selling people <u>is</u> wrong — does not just <u>feel</u> wrong. But if your premise [that there is no God] leads you to a conclusion that you know isn't true [namely that these things only feel wrong, but are not wrong] why not change the premise?

Acts

Paul's arrest and defense

Study 22 | Acts 21:27 - 22:29

1. **21:27-36. Trace the parallels between Paul's suffering and Christ's? In what way is this instructive for us personally?**

2. **21:30-39. What does it tell us about Paul that he would turn and speak to the mob when he did?**

3. **22:1-22. How is Paul's speech well-designed for its audience and the situation?**

4. **How is Paul's speech specifically instructive for us? Have you had experiences in which someone became very offended by what you said about your faith? In light of this passage, was the reason for that mainly in you or mainly in them (or both)?**

5. **22:22-29. Compare these verses with 16:22,23,37-39. Why does Paul mention his citizenship to avoid the flogging here, when he did not do so in Phillipi? How is this instructive for us?**

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**

3. **How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**

4. **Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?**

C. WHY TO BELIEVE IN GOD (CONT.) C-3

The "Mind" Argument for God

One of the things that we see is that our minds *work,* that our sense perception and rational intuition help us perceive the real world. But if there is no God, and everything has a physical, natural cause, then we are led to some very disturbing conclusions about our own minds. Thoughts of the brain are only the results of non-rational, non-intelligent chemical processes in the brain. Neuroscientists today tell us that all thinking is the product of chemicals which are the product of our genetic code, brought to us by the long process of evolution. Therefore all our thinking and choices are pre-determined — there is no real freedom of thought. This is an inescapable conclusion of the belief that there is no God or eternal reality. But if our thoughts are not free and rational, but determined, then so are the thoughts that espouse this view, in which case we cannot trust them — they are only conditioned responses. And so we are in the position of listening to a man who says, "don't trust a word I am saying". You have to dismiss that sentence as self-refuting nonsense — failing to satisfy its own criteria of acceptability. Any view of the universe which would make it impossible to trust our thinking or minds to tell us about reality hast to be dismissed.

"But surely the process of evolution has given us minds that we can trust, for we could not have survived unless they told us about reality."

Evolutionary biology is no help here at all. Darwinian theory is that absolutely every capacity we have is due to a process called "natural selection", in which those traits that help us adapt to our environment are passed along genetically (since only those with those traits survive). Our minds therefore were not designed by a Creator to perceive the real world, they are produced by a blind process that helps us survive in the world. Now we cannot possibly know that perceiving reality leads to surviving, only that what we perceive leads to surviving. For example, we know that "psychological" survival needs regularly lead us to repress or deny realities. If it is too painful to acknowledge how angry someone is or how hurt someone is through our behavior, we may complete deceive ourselves about it — just refuse to "see" it. What proof have we that the same thing has not happened to our capacities for perceiving the physical world. The simple fact is that evolutionary theory says the purpose of our minds is physical survival, not the production of true beliefs, and therefore it gives us no reason to trust our minds — quite the contrary. In fact, Darwin himself admits this, when he wrote: *"The horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of a man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there were any convictions in such a mind?"* At best evolution makes us agnostic about our minds, which means we should then be agnostic about evolution itself, and everything else.

"But maybe our minds just emerged and do 'work' — why do we have to have a God for that?"

This raises an additional problem for the non-theistic world-view. The main reason our minds help us understand the world is what has been called "the uniformity of nature". The method of generalizing from observed cases to all cases of the same kind is called "induction". Without it, we would not be able to learn from experience, we would not be able to use language, we would not be able to rely on memory or advance science, all of which involve observing similarities and projecting them into the future. Now if we set the theistic view next to the non-theistic (which sees the universe as the production of random matter-in-motion) and ask: "which view best comports with the inductive principle?" we have to conclude that it isn't the non-theistic view.

Conclusion

So we see the severe problems with non-theistic thinking — it cannot account for itself! It is belief in God that provides us the necessary pre-conditions for trusting our minds at all, or accounting for why induction and deduction and sense perception works at all. Rational mind appears to be a reality (and to deny it is self-defeating), yet how do we account for it unless there is a rational mind behind the universe? Some say, "though there is no God, I just know that reason works". What that means is: "though your world-view does lead us to expect what we see and mine does not, I am going to hold it anyway." But if our premise (that there is no God) leads to a conclusion that is completely impossible to hold (that we cannot trust our minds, including the thought that we cannot trust our minds), why not question the premise?

C-4

The "Music" Argument for God

One of the things that we see in the world is that great art makes us feel that there is meaning in life, that love is real, that somethings are valuable. For example, Leonard Bernstein said, "Listening to Beethoven's Fifth, you get the feeling there's something right with the world, something that checks throughout, something that follows its own laws consistently, something we can trust, that will never let us down." This is a simple fact of experience. We all disagree on which art is "great" and which art affects us like this, but we all experience it. But if there is no God, love is an illusion — it is just a function of my brain chemistry, and beautiful music is also an illusion — it is just the way my nervous system is designed. Either there is a God, or love and beauty is an absolute illusion. C.S.Lewis put it quite well:

> "Let us suppose that Nature is all that exists… you can't, except in the lowest animal sense, be in love with a girl if you know (and keep on remembering) that all the beauties both of her person and of her character are a momentary and accidental pattern produced by the collision of atoms, and that your own response to them is only a sort of psychic phosphorescence arising from the behavior of your genes. You can't go on getting very serious pleasure from music if you know and remember that its air of significance is a pure illusion,that you like it only because your nervous system is irrationally conditioned to like it. You may still, in the lowest sense, have a "good time"; but just in so far as it becomes very good, just in so far as it ever threatens to push you on from cold sensuality into real warmth and enthusiasm and joy, so far you will be forced to feel the hopeless disharmony between the universe in which you really live [and the universe in which you think you live].

So either there is a God, or love and beauty and meaning are a complete illusion (and why would these deep convictions have ever arisen, anyway?)

"But just because we feel these things are real is no argument that they exist."

But are we only talking about "feelings" here? There is a difference between innate and artificial desires. For example, just because you want a Coke doesn't mean there is a Coke at hand, nor does it mean that one exists anywhere in the world. But thirst is fundamental and innate, and it does mean that there is such a thing as liquid. The desire for Coke came from factors outside of us (advertizing, personal experience), but the thirst desire is completely natural and innate. Artificial desires can exist without a corresponding object. But innate desires correspond always to real objects that can satisfy them, such as with sexual desire (corresponding to sex), physical appetite (corresponding to food), tiredness (corresponding to sleep), relational desires (corresponding to friendship).

Now there exists in us a desire that nothing in time and space can satisfy, a desire for an unknown "something" that no amount of food, sex, friendship, success can satisfy. Human beings everywhere and at all times have been overwhelmingly religious, believing in something beyond the here and now that will fill the desire for that "something". This is an innate desire. Again, Lewis puts it best. "*So, a ducking wants to swim — such a thing as water; a baby wants to suck — such a thing as milk. And if I find in myself a longing which this world cannot meet, then it probably means that I was made for another world as well.*"

Conclusion

The non-theist says: "well, though there is no God, we just know that this is the one innate, deep, normal desire that has no object." That means — that though Christian world view DOES lead us to expect what we see, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we know (that the vast majority of people sense that there is another world) — why not change the premise?

Acts

Before the Sanhedrin

Study 23 | Acts 22:30 - 21:11

1. **22:30-23:1 – Paul is facing death at any minute. What do we see here is one of the secrets of his boldness? How does I Cor.4:1-4 help us understand what a "good conscience" is?**

2. **23:1. How can we have a good conscience when we know we are sinners? How can Paul (in Acts 23 and I Cor 4:3-5) give us guidance for having the same kind of confidence that he had?**

3. **23:1-5. Commentators are divided over: a) why Ananias had Paul struck and b) how Paul could have failed to recognize the High Priest. What do you think? Was Paul's anger wrong? How does Paul's own statement in Eph.4:26-27 shed light on this issue? How does Paul get self-control? Where do you need to practice these insights?**

4. **23:6-10. What was Paul's tactic in this hearing? Did it work? Was Paul more concerned with his own welfare or more concerned for the truth?**

5. **23:11. How does the Lord encourage Paul? How does he encourage you during hard times?**

WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY

Part 1 – Trusting the Bible

Why should we trust the Bible in general? Because Jesus taught and believed in the Bible's trustworthiness (John 5:37-39, 46-47; 10:34; Matthew 5:17,19; 19:4-5). But how can we know what Jesus did and taught? Because the four gospels in the New Testament can be trusted as reliable history.

"But we don't even have the original manuscripts — we only have copies of copies. Who knows how reliable they are?"

No scholars doubt that what we have today is essentially the same Gospels as originally written. The earliest copies we have of other documents of antiquity are usually 500-1000 years newer than the originals. (For example, the oldest copy of Caesar's *Gallic Wars* [c.50 B.C.] is from 850 A.D. Yet no historian doubts that we can trust it.) Yet we have thousands of copies of the Bible, some within a few decades of its composition.

"But weren't the gospels really legends written long after the events, so that we cannot be sure that they reflect accurate first person memory?"

In the 19th century, many scholars insisted that the Bible was written over 100 years after the event, but archaeology and scholarship has forced the consensus that all the Gospels were written 65-95 A.D., or 30-60 years after the life of Jesus. (And St.Paul's letters, which contain much information about Jesus, were written just two decades after his death.) Thus all the essential historical claims of the New Testament (that Jesus did miracles such as the raising of Lazarus, that he claimed to be God, that dozens of people saw him risen from the dead) were circulating within the lifetime of thousands of people who had lived in Judea and had witnessed Jesus' ministry. How could Christianity have flourished when thousands of people (many of them hostile) could have contradicted the message?

Imagine a book coming out that claims that on a a day 45 years ago, in a remote town of 5,000 in Canada, a flying saucer landed in full view of all the town. Certainly someone would go to that town and ask for corroboration. But what if none of the 1,000 residents still alive, who were there on that day, denied any such memory. What if the thousands of residents who were related or who knew the thousands of now deceased residents report that they never had heard anything about it in all those years? Surely, the author of the book could insist that people were lying, or that some miraculous "memory loss" had happened. But the number of believers in the book would be exceedingly small. In the same way, it would have been impossible for Christianity to have gained such widespread support if its critical historical claims were bluntly contradicted by the numerous witnesses who were still alive.

"But still — 30 to 60 years is a long time. How can we be sure memories of Jesus' words and deeds were accurate?"

Some have taught that, after the death of Christ, the early Christians spun out stories of Jesus' words and deeds which quickly changed and evolved in the telling, in a sort of "whisper down the alley" way. But we know that the rules of Jewish oral tradition (which would have governed the teaching of the earliest church) insisted on accurately memorizing massive amounts of material. Jewish disciples of a rabbi would have memorized his teachings word for word and then would have passed on the tradition faithfully and unaltered. The New Testament itself claims that this is what happened (Luke 1:1-4; I Corinthians 15:3-8; Col.2:7), so that when the Gospels were written, the writers could draw not only on eyewitness memories, but on large amounts of Jesus' words and deeds carefully preserved in the churches. One of the evidences of this is how often the Gospels, written in Greek, preserve Aramaic words and word order. (Aramaic was the language of Jesus.)

"But ancient writers were not interested in the difference between fact and legend."

This is simply not the case. While ancient historians were not as critical and precise as modern ones, there was a real effort to ask "did it really happen"? Luke (1:1-4) makes a very specific claim to be preserving historical facts through eyewitness accounts and the painstaking checking of sources. Also, ancient legends and forms of fiction did not contain the kind of detailed descriptions of events that the Gospels do. There are numerous examples of "irrelevant details" (like the 153 fish in John 21:11) which have no reason to be included in the narrative and would not have occurred to the author unless they simply happened. The *"I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know none of them are like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage… pretty close to the facts, nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown [ancient] writer… without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern novelistic, realistic narrative...The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned how to read."* (C.S.Lewis) Therefore, these are either history or very intentional and deliberate fabricated lies, but they are not legends.

"But — no offense — isn't that what religious activists do? Didn't the authors embellish and shape the story of Jesus to bolster their authority and meet the needs of the early church?"

Certainly we must agree that the Gospel writers were not just reporters, but were teachers. They had their perspectives and they selected and organized their material to get their points across. But all the same reasons (stated above) make it impossible for them to have done outright fabrications: the rules of Jewish oral tradition, the non-fictional literary form, the blunt claims of accuracy, and the continued presence of corroborative eyewitnesses. A.N.Sherwin-White, an Oxford historian, studied the rate at which legend accumulated in the ancient world and wiped out the core of historical fact. It took at least three full generations. The essential claims of Christianity were publically circulating within too short a time for that to happen.

"But aren't the Gospels full of contradictions?"

This is a great misconception. Most of the contradictions between the Gospels are the result of the authors' selective use of data. For example, Luke 24 seems to say that Jesus ascended on the same day that he rose from the dead (thus contradicting the other Gospels). But in Acts 1 (also written by Luke) we see that Luke did know about the 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension. Many other apparent discrepancies are explained similarly. There are a few difficuties that are harder to explain, but we should remember that we are only arguing here that the Gospels are reliable history.

Summary Why are we only arguing for the historical reliability of the Gospels? Because if they are reliable, then we can view the evidence for the claim that Jesus is the Son of God. If we decide that he is that, we will be able to embrace the entire trustworthiness of the Bible, because he taught it. If we do not accept his claims, we are not going to accept the whole Bible (nor will we need to).

Acts

Escape to Felix

Study 24 | Acts 23:11 - 24:21

1. **What is the relationship of v.11 to the rest of the chapter? How does it shed light on a) God's actions, and b) Paul's heart and attitude? What does v.11 guarantee, and what does it not guarantee? Do we have anything like the same guarantee or promise that Paul was given?**

2. **23:12-35. John Stott writes: "the most… cunning of human plans cannot succeed if God opposes them." a) How does this passage show this? (Trace the "coincidences".) b) How has your experience shown this? How does Claudius Lysias twist the truth to look good? Do you ever do this?**

3. **24:1-9. Make a list of the charges brought against Paul before Felix? What evidence is mustered for each charge?**

4. **24:10-21. How does Paul defend himself against the accusations?**

5. **Are any of these charges against Paul also thrown at Christians in New York City? How can we answer them?**

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WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY

Part 2 – The possibility of miracles

Before we can assess the evidence for Jesus' claims and identity we must first be in the position of admitting at least the possibility of miracles. But this is something that a great number of contemporary people cannot do. Broadly speaking, there are three basic reasons for rejecting the possibility of miracles.

"We cannot believe in miracles in a modern, technological age."
This view was put forth in a famous statement by Rudolph Bultmann in the 1950's, when he wrote, "it is impossible to use electrical lights and the radio and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles". But this is not an argument, it is really only just an emotional assertion — "*I* feel when I use technology that miracles don't exist". But why should a new invention lead us to disbelieve in God? Why didn't we stop believing in God when the wheel was invented (a much more revolutionary technological advance than electricity or even the microprocessor). Some people feel skeptical or miracles and many others feel the opposite. Such psychological and sociological facts do not provide evidence either way.

"Modern science makes it impossible to believe in miracles."
"We now know", this view goes, "that there are Laws of Nature which cannot be violated". But first, fewer and fewer scientists are willing to talk about "laws" of nature. Physical science has had a revolution lately in which the assumed invoilability of Newtonian mechanics has given way to quantum theory, in which physical 'laws' are now only seen as regularities of nature. "Laws" are really only descriptions of how entities usually behave. Experience can only tell us that a "law" or custom of nature has not been violated, but empirical observation could never prove that it never can be.

Secondly, while nature has regularities, they can be altered by the actions of personal agents. For example, a baseball ought to fall to the ground when I let it go (because the the "law of gravity"), but it will not if another person catches it and holds it up. Now if personal agents can regularly bring about new events that would not have occurred by natural forces alone, how much more, if God exists, could he do so? If God exists, the laws of nature are not rules to which he must submit, but are just customary ways in which he upholds the world. If he wills something unusual on a particular occasion, then a "miracle" occurs, but there is nothing analogous to a human being breaking through a barrier or violating a law.

"But I don't know that there is a God, and therefore I cannot assume that miracles are possible."

But this statement is not really reasonable. Not knowing that there is a God is not the same as *knowing there is no God.* And you would have to absolutely know that there is no God in order to say "miracles are impossible". Unless you could prove that there is no personal God who can alter nature's regularities, then you cannot assume that miracles are impossible. Since (as we tried to show in previous places) no one can prove that God cannot exist, therefore no one can insist on the impossibility of miracles. Therefore, we must be at least open to historical accounts, like the Gospels, which attest to miracles like the resurrection of Christ.

Sum: Miracles are impossible only if you assume (take on faith) that there is no personal supernatural God. To say, "miracles are impossible" is thus a statement of faith, not something that anyone can prove. It is to say, "miracles cannot happen because miracles just cannot happen." Therefore, many efforts to explain away Biblical miracles require greater "leaps of faith" than to accept them.

> "When the Old Testament says that Sennacherib's invasion was stopped by angels (II Kings 19:35), and Herodotus says it was stopped by a lot of mice who came and ate up all the bowstrings of the whole army (Herodotus, Bk.II, Sect.141), an open-minded person will be on the side of the angels. Unless you start by beggin the question [assuming miracles cannot happen] there is nothing intrinsically unlikely in the existence of angels or in the action described to them. But mice just don't do these things."
>
> – C.S. Lewis

Acts
Before Felix and Festus

Study 25 | Acts 24:22 - 25:22

1. **24:22-27. What hints are there that Felix and Drusilla were interested in Paul's message? Why do you think they might have been? (Consider what we know about them from the introduction.) What does that tell us about how and why people show interest in the gospel?**

2. **24:24-27. What can we tell from this brief description that Paul said to Felix and Drusilla?**

3. **24:22-27. What were the four factors that contributed to prevent Felix from embracing the gospel? Do the same factors prevent you from doing what is right?**

4. **25:1-12. How do the charges differ this time? Why did Festus offer Paul a trial in Jerusalem? Why did Paul refuse Festus' offer of a trial in Jerusalem and claim his right to appeal to Caesar?**

5. **25:13-22. What do Paul's actions teach us about our relationship to civil authority?**

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

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WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY

Part 3 – The Resurrection of Jesus Christ
The case for the resurrection of Christ is very strong, as long as we grant the possibility of miracles. If we do that, then three basic lines of evidence converge to convince us that Jesus rose from the dead: 1) the fact of the empty tomb, 2) the testimony of numerous eyewitnesses, 3) the long-term impact on the lives of Jesus' followers. If we try to explain these effects away, we find ourselves making even greater leaps of faith than if we believed in the resurrection itself.

How do we know the tomb was empty at all? (Isn't this just legend)?
We know that the early church was proclaiming the resurrection of Christ very early. We also know that there was great hostility from the leaders of Jerusalem toward the spread of Christianity. Therefore, since the earliest church preached the empty tomb — it must have been empty, or no one would have believed the preaching for a minute.

Here is one more piece of historical evidence. The gospel writers mention that the earliest hostile explanation of the empty tomb was that the disciples had stolen it (Matt.28:13). It is extremely unlikely that, if the gospel writers were fabricating these resurrection stories, they would have made up and provided such a plausible alternative explanation for the empty tomb. The fact that they include the body-snatching claim is very strong evidence that it existed. And if it existed, then there must have been an empty tomb that had to be explained.

But even if the tomb is empty, that does not prove a resurrection.
No, but other considerations make it hard to believe in the three possible non-supernatural explanations for the empty tomb. First is the theory that Jesus did not die on the cross, but revived in the tomb. But this is contradicted by the second line of evidence — the eyewitness sightings. Second is the theory that the disciples stole the body. But this is contradicted by both the second and also the third line of evidence — the changed lives of the believers. Third is the theory that the enemies stole it. This is the weakest of all the theories, since enemies would have had strong reasons to produce the body, if they had it.

Here is one more piece of historical evidence. The account of the folded graveclothes in John 20:5-7 contradicts all the theories. It indicates that the graveclothes of Jesus left behind in the tomb were still wrapped around, as if the body had passed through it. If anyone had stolen the body, why would they leave the grave clothes behind, neatly wrapped and folded? Or if Jesus had revived, how could he have gotten out of the graveclothes without tearing them to pieces? (cf. John 11:44)

How do we know anyone claimed to see Jesus? Aren't these just legends?
We can tell that the eyewitness accounts were not legendary. Why? First, Paul in I Corinthians 15 makes a long list of people who claimed to have seen the risen Christ personally, and notes that *"most of them are still living"* (I Cor.15:6). How could Paul write that "Mary and Peter said they saw the risen Jesus" when Peter and Mary were saying, "no we didn't"? It is extremely difficult to see how Christianity could have spread so rapidly if Paul's amazing assertions were so easily refuted. Scholars have noted that legendary accounts of historical events take at least two generations to accrue, long after the eyewitnesses are gone to act as controls on the narratives.

Second, every gospel states that the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection were women. In those times, women's low social status meant that their testimony was usually not admissible evidence in court. There was no reason for Christian writers to fabricate accounts of women seeing Christ first. The only explanation for the existence of these reports is that they really happened. So we can conclude that there really were many, many people who claimed to have seen the risen Christ personally.

Couldn't the eyewitness accounts been a hallucination, or a conspiracy?
Once we grant that the eyewitness claims really occurred, there are two factors that make it highly unlikely that they would be hallucination or a conspiracy. First, the eyewitnesses accounts are too numerous and the groups of eyewitnesses are too large. Paul alone mentions five appearances, and there are three or four others mentioned by the gospels. Acts 1:3-4 tells us that for forty days he appeared constantly to numerous groups of people. And I Cor.15:6 tells us that at one "sighting", five hundred persons saw him at once. The size of the groups and the number of the sightings make it virtually impossible to conclude that all these people had hallucinations. Either they must have actually seen Christ, or hundreds of people must have been part of an elaborate conspiracy which lasted for decades. Paul suggests to his readers that any of them can go and talk to the five hundred witnesses. This would have been a hoax that lasted for years, and one in which no conspirators ever broke down and told the truth.

But the final difficulty with the conspiracy theory is how hard it is to square it with the subsequent lives of the apostles and earliest disciples. Scholars recognize now that first century Jewish people did not believe in an individual resurrrection, but only in a general resurrection at the end of time. But despite the fact that their belief system provided no basis for it — they began to proclaim the resurrection of Christ. And despite the fact that they were poor and small and marginal, they developed a confidence and joy that enabled them to spread the gospel so powerfully that it transformed the whole Roman world. Most impressive of all is the historical fact that nearly all the early apostle's died as martyrs. As Pascal put it, *"I [believe] those witnesses that get their throats cut"*. It is hard to believe that this kind of powerful self-sacrifice could be done for a hoax.

notes

Summary

It is impossible for Christianity to have begun unless the tomb was empty. We know that there were hundreds and hundreds of eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen Jesus dozens of time. There were too many sightings for them to be hallucinations. Yet the transformed, sacrificial lives of the early disciples surely indicates that the beliefs were sincere. Therefore, it is most reasonable to conclude that the disciples saw what they said they saw.

Acts
Before Agrippa (Part I)

Study 26 | Acts 25:13 - 26:23

1. **25:13-27. How is Festus' summary of the case (v18-20; 24-27) a mixture of truth and untruth?**

2. **25:13-27. How does his "spin" reveal how Paul is a problem for Festus? Why is Agrippa a help for him?**

3. **25:23-27. Why is this such a tremendous opportunity to proclaim the gospel. Consider how many things God had to work together for this to occur. Refer to the last few chapters.**

4. **25:23-27. How many of these factors were "bad" things? How can this illustration of Romans 8:28 help you right now?**

5. **26:1-23. Trace each stage of Paul's defense by giving a one sentence argument that summarizes his point in: vv.2-3, vv.4-8, vv.9-11, vv.12-16, vv.17-21, vv.22-23. Most of us do not have such dramatic "testimonies" such as this one, but what can we learn from Paul for our own sharing of our experience?**

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

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WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY.

Part 4a – The Challenge of Jesus Christ — His claims.
At the heart of the evidence for Christianity is a great conundrum. There is an unsurpassed moral and spiritual beauty about the character and the teaching of Jesus. Huston Smith, in *The World's Great Religions* says that only Buddha and Jesus so impressed their contemporaries that they were not just asked "who are you?" but "*what* are you?" But the difficulty for observers comes in just at this point, for Buddha asserted that he was *not* a god, but Jesus repeatedly and continually claimed to be *the* God, the Creator of the universe. So on the one hand, there is a person of supreme love and moral wisdom, but on the other, a man whose claims *"if not true, are those of a megalomaniac, compared with whom Hitler was the most sane and humble of men."* (C.S. Lewis)

But couldn't his followers have just make these divine claims up?
No. A number of reasons were given in sheet #1, above. But the main reason is that the original followers of Christ were Jews, and the divinity of a human being is the very last thing that first century Jewish minds would be able to make up. Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius *et al* were able, through strenuous, emphatic protestations, to convince their subsequent followers that they were not to be worshipped, that they were only teachers. Yet their first followers had views of God which allowed the possibility of a God-man. But first century Jews had a theology and a culture that in every regard was completely and totally resistent to the idea of God becoming human. The concept would not have even occurred to them. Many believe that Jesus, like all the other founders of great religions, was a humble sage who refused divine claims. But if Jesus had also denied that he was God, why would he have failed where the other founders succeeded, and with the least likely people on earth to divinize their teacher? The letters of Paul (written only 15-25 years after Jesus' death) and the even earlier hymns and creeds he quotes (like Phillipians 2:5-11) show that the Christians worshipped Jesus immediately after his death. The only fair explanation is that Jesus was the source of the claims — that his continual and powerful assertions of deity eventually broke through their walls of resistance.

But why couldn't he just have been a very good teacher?
The strength of the Christ's claims make that option impossible. First there were all this astounding indirect claims. (1) Jesus assumed authority to forgive all sins (Mark 2:7-10) — not just sins against him. Since we can only forgive sins that are against us, Jesus' premise is that all sins are against him, and therefore that he is God whose laws are broken and whose love offended in every violation. (2) Jesus claimed that he alone could give eternal life (John 6:39,40), though God alone has the right to give or take life. More than that, Jesus claimed to have a power that could actually eliminate death, and he

claims not just to have or bring a power to raise the dead, but to be *the* Power that can destroy death (John 11: 25-26). (3) Jesus claimed to have the truth as no one else ever has. All prophets said, "thus saith the Lord" but Jesus teaches with "but *I* say unto you" out of his own authority (Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32) And more than that, he claims not just to have or bring truth, but to be *the* Truth itself, the source and locus of all truth (John 14:6). (4) Jesus assumed the authority to judge the world (Mark 14:62). Since God alone has both the infinite knowledge and the right (as Creator and owner) to evaluate every person, Jesus premise is that he has both divine attributes. More than that, Jesus claimed that we will be judged in the end primarily on our attitude toward him (Matt.10:32,33; John 3:18). (5) Jesus assumed the right to receive worship (John 5:23, 9:38; Luke 5:8; John 20:28-29) which neither great persons nor even angels would accept (Rev.22:8,9; Acts 14:11-15). (6) His even off-hand statements and actions continually assume that he has divine status. He claims to have sent all the prophets and wise teachers in the world through all the centuries (Matt.23:34). (So he is claiming to be eternal.) He comes to the temple and says all the rules about observing the Sabbath are off now because the inventor of the Sabbath is now here (Mark 2:23-28). (So he is claiming to be Creator.) He puts his own knowledge on a par with God the Father's (Matt.11:27) (So he is claiming to be all-knowing). He claimed to be perfectly sinless (John 8:46). (So he is claiming to be completely holy.) He says that the greatest person in the history of the world was John the Baptist, but that the weakest follower of Christ is greater than he (Matt.11:11). This list could be stretched out indefinitely.

Then there are his direct claims, which are staggering. John Stott has organized his assertions this way. (1) To know him is to know God (John 8:19), (2) to see him was to see God (John 12:45), (3) to receive him is the receive the God (Mark 9:37). Only through him can anyone know or come to God (Matt.11:27; John 14:6). Even when Jesus called himself "*the* Son of God", he was claiming equality with the Father, since in ancient times an only son inherited all the father's wealth and position and was thus equal with him. The listeners knew that everytime Jesus called him self "*the* Son", he was naming himself as fully God (John 5:18). Finally, Jesus actually takes upon himself the divine name "I AM" (John 8:58, cf. Exodus 3:14; 6:33), claiming to the "Yahweh" who appeared to Moses in the burning bush.

We must remember one more point. Eastern religions were "pantheistic" and understand God to be the spiritual force in everything, so to say "I am part of God" or "I am one with God" is not terribly unusual. Western religions were "polytheistic" and believed in various gods who could take on human guises. But Jesus was Jew, and when he described God he meant the God who was beginningless Creator who was infinitely exalted above everything else. This means that what he was saying was the most stupendous claim that anyone has ever made. And he did not make it once or twice. Rather, his was a consciousness which suffused everything he said and did. We cannot minimize

notes

these. If you heard a man saying "I have always existed, I created the world, I am ultimate reality. I will return at the end of time and your fate will depend on your obedience to me." — you could not laugh. You would reject him, or fear him, or attack him, but you could not consider him a fine moral teacher. He did not leave that open.

Please immediately read part 4b. These two parts go together.

Acts
Before Agrippa (Part II)

Study 27 | Acts 26:1-32

1. **22:12-18. How is this account of Paul's conversion different from the others — in 9:1-19; 22:5-16? How do those differences show Paul tailoring his presentation to his audience?**

2. **26:17-23. What does Paul tell Agrippa here about a) the need for salvation (our lost condition), b) the method of salvation (how to become a Christian), and finally, c) the ground of salvation (the reason God can save us)?**

3. **26:24-27. How does Paul summarize his two lines of argument in a final stunning, direct appeal to the king?**

4. **Should we be as direct in our argumentation as Paul was?**

5. **26:30-32. Once again, Luke shows that Paul is not guilty — and that Christianity is not disruptive to public order and society? Why do you think Luke is pressing this point so much? How can we make the same case today?**

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WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY.

Part 4b – The Challenge of Jesus Christ — His character

The first part of the challenge of Jesus Christ is the extraordinarily self-centered teaching. We must try to grasp how absolutely astounding these claims were to the listeners. We can do that partially by imagining how you yourself would react if a neighbor of yours began to claim that he or she was the Creator of the universe who would judge the world. You would almost certainly regard your neighbor as either insane or fraudulent. That, of course, explains the actual historical record of human reactions to him. He spawned either passionate worshippers or furious people who wanted to kill him. If he was a "good, moral teacher", we cannot explain either the worshippers *or* his execution. Anyone who knew anything about him knew that there were only three possibile explanations for him: he was either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord he claimed to be.

Well, why could he not have been a fraud, then? There have been lots of cult leaders who claimed to be divine.

This brings us to the second part of the challenge of Jesus Christ. What is startling is not just that his claims that were so self-centered, but that his character and his actions were so completely unself-centered. The accounts of him in the New Testament speak for themselves. He combines qualities that no one ever has. Despite his incredible claims, we never see him pompous or offended or standing on his own dignity. (As one said, "*in thought he put himself first; in deed, last*".) Despite being absolutely approachable to the weakest and most broken people, he is completely fearless before the proud and corrupt. Despite being profoundly human, and becoming weary and lonely and moved to joy and love and anger, yet we never see him moody, we never see him inconsistent, we never see him being strong where he should be tender or tender where he should be strong. Most interesting of all, in the accounts of his dealings with people, he is continually surprising us, shocking us, yet never disappointing us. One writer summed it up with a remarkable challenge:

> "No one has ever yet discovered the word Jesus ought to have said or the deed he ought to have done. Nothing he does falls short, in fact, he is always surprising you and taking your breath away, because he is incomparably better than you could imagine for yourself. Why? They are the surprises of perfection. He is tenderness without weakness, strength without harshness, humility without the slightest lack of confidence, holiness and unbending convictions without the slightest lack of approachability, power without insensitivity, passion without prejudice. There is never a false step, never a jarring note. This is life at the highest."

But can we really be sure those Biblical stories aren't embellished and idealized?
We should reflect on why it is that no major religion has a founder which claimed to be God, (though many tiny, unsuccessful cults have). There have been many people in history who have made divine claims, but they have never been able to make their assertions broadly believable except to that tiny percentage of the population which is unusually credulous or emotionally needy. Why not? First, there are always people who have grown up with and lived with the claimant, and they know his or her character flaws. Second, there is a huge resistance in the human mind to such an assertion. In Jesus' case, we must also remember that, though there were Jews who claimed to be the Messiah, there has never been a member of that culture in its 4,000 year history who has even made such an allegation, let alone got anyone to believe it.

Yet this is what Jesus did. Does a liar produce the kind of humble, utterly self-less, sacrificial, forgiving lifestyle that Jesus had? What kind of life must Jesus have had to have led to overcome the profound resistance of Jews to such unique claims? What kind of life must Jesus have had to have led to convince even the people who lived with him? What kind of life would Jesus have had to have led to do what no other person in history has ever done — convince more than a tiny percentage of unbalanced people that he is the Creator and Judge of the universe? It would have to have been like the incomparable life depicted in the New Testament.

Maybe, then, he really was insane?
But this possibility is greatly undermined by the almost universally acclaimed wisdom and beauty of Jesus' teaching. The great consensus of history is that the teaching of Jesus is at least as remarkable and brilliant as that of any other great sage. G.K. Chesterton wrote:

> "If I found a key on the road and discovered it fit and opened a particular lock, I'd assume most likely the key was made by the lockmaker. If I find a set of teaching set out in pre-modern Oriental society that has proven itself of such universal validity that it has fascinated or satisfied millions of people in every century, including the best minds and yet the simplest hearts, that it has made itself at home in virtually every culture, inspired masterpieces in every field of art, and continues to grow and spread rapidly… [even today], are they likely to be the work of a deceiver or a fool? In fact, it is more likely they were designed by the heart-maker."

In summary, then. The claims of Jesus make it impossible that he would be just a good man. The character and teaching of Jesus make it nearly impossible to believe that he was a deceiver or insane. The resurrection of Jesus clinches the case.

notes

But it is crazy and ridiculous to believe that a human being could be God?

Amazing — yes. But why is it ridiculous? Once we remove a dogmatic bias against miracles (see sheet #2), then it is even more crazy and ridiculous to believe the alternatives to the Christian explanation for the phenomenon of Jesus. How could a man who produced a kind of life and teaching that has never been produced before be a liar or a lunatic? How could a man make the claims he did and make good on them? How could hundreds of people be deceived into thinking they saw him alive after his resurrection? Yet if they were not deceived, but deceivers, why would have they lived and died sacrificially for a hoax? As hard as it is to believe that he is God come to earth, it is more difficult not to. Is it really impossible for God to become human? Why, if God is really all powerful, could he not have done it? And why, if God is really all-loving, would he not have done it?

Acts

Shipwreck

Study 28 | Acts 27:1-44

1. **27:1-12. The account of Paul's voyage to Rome is vivid with details. Why does Luke know so much about the voyage? Make a list of the statements in these early verses that indicate first hand experience (that the narrator could not know from simply looking at a map).**

2. **27:1-26. How does God give Paul encouragement during the voyage? How has God sustained you during tough "voyages"?**

3. **Compare Paul's predictions in v.10 and vv.21-25. Does he contradict himself here? Have you ever experienced a disaster a) which was do to your refusal to take advice, yet b) was graciously eased and lightened by God?**

4. **Compare the response to Paul's advice v.10 and v.30-32? Why do they follow his leadership at the end but not at the beginning? What does this tell us about leadership in general? How did Paul's leadership save everyone's life twice (v.31-32; 42-22)?**

5. **a) What tension is there between Paul's prediction of v.22 and his command in v.31? b) How do these two statements show the unique view of Christianity with regards to the old "fate vs. free will" debate? c) Why is this view so intensely practical for our daily living?**

Acts

To Rome (finally!)

Study 29 | Acts 28:1-31

1. **28:1-16. This is the end of the story of Paul's journey to Rome. Many people think this account was too long in proportion to its value. Do you? Why?**

2. **28:17-28. What does Paul's movements in these verses tell you about his ministry strategy?**

3. **28:30-31. Why does Luke leave us hanging like this? Does this seem like an appropriate ending to the book? Why or why not?**

4. **Try to put the theme or message of the book of Acts into one sentence.**

5. **Looking back over the book, what major lessons stick out to you? What verses or incidents were the most personally significant for you? Why?**

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